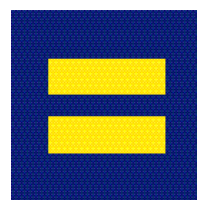


Mixed Blessings



HUMAN
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Organized Religion and Gay and Lesbian Americans in 1998

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By Lisa Bennett

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About the Author

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Foreword

By the Rev. Jimmy Creech

The ground is shifting! While there was no earthquake-like change, it is clear that the religious basis for heterosexism and homophobia was shaken in 1998 and will never be the same.

This report documents subtle yet significant shifts in religious attitudes and policies that promise the future emancipation of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people from religious condemnation and persecution.

It correctly states: “[T]here is no one religious view about gay and lesbian people;” and, “there is more controversy about religious attitudes and policies toward gay and lesbian people today than there has ever been.” These facts in themselves are reasons for hope. No longer can it be claimed that Judeo-Christian traditions and teachings clearly, consistently and irrefutably condemn “homosexuality” as sinful and unnatural. The multiplicity of policies and teachings among the religious communities are subject to temporal influences and thus are evolving as we come to better understand ourselves as human beings within our root traditions of faith.

The controversy and chaos that have resulted could not be more advantageous to us. Opportunity for change best occurs in times of instability and when the public discussion is pervasive and hot. Of course, there will be resistance and much rhetorical violence, as well as physical violence. Those invested in the status quo do not surrender quietly or gently. But the current rise in the attack against the gay community by the religious right is only a sign that progress is being made, that positive change is taking place.

This change has happened because of lesbian and gay Jews and Christians who have claimed their rightful place within their religious communities. It has happened because some courageous clergy and laypersons, often in conflict with their governing bodies, have given faithful witness to the compassion and justice of God — the heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition — by affirming in word and action the acceptance of all people as beloved and worthy children of God. It has happened because religious bodies have carefully studied human sexuality and have had changes in heart and mind — and, consequently, in teaching and policy — that are more accepting and affirming of gay and lesbian people. All of this did not happen in the past year. Much of it happened years ago, with the cumulative impact causing a ground-shift in 1998.

We are in transition from a culture of rigid heterosexism and patriarchy toward a culture that is open to sexual diversity and free from sexual oppression. A dream too good to be true? No, I don’t think so. It is an ancient dream too good to deny, a dream worth believing and living even now, a dream whose time has come.

It has already taken a long time to get where we are as a culture, and it will take more time still. But we are on the edge of a change that will not be reversed. It is happening. The signs are clear.

We cannot and must not be impatient and expect all necessary change to happen overnight. Nor should we be satisfied with the change that has occurred, afraid of potential backlash from pushing for more. We must be persistent and undaunted. We must be resolute and not turn back.

No other time in history has offered gay and lesbian people, as well as non-gay people, the opportunity to break away from the rock-hard sexual repression of the past and fully realize the human dignity, integrity and freedom of all people as sexual beings.

Read this report as a record of the change taking place; as promise, not as a final report. Read it as a point in time, a chapter in the continuing story that tells how the Loving Ground who supports and accepts you moves with grace, compassion and justice toward your freedom. Don’t ignore the negatives. Let them be instructive, not discouraging. And let the positives empower you with the hope for the dream toward which you journey.

Blessings on you!

The Judicial Council of the United Methodist Church ruled in 1998 that Creech violated church law by blessing the union of two women. His contract as pastor of the First United Methodist Church in Omaha was not renewed.

Introduction

POPULAR IMPRESSIONS TO THE CONTRARY, THERE IS NO SINGLE RELIGIOUS view about gay and lesbian people. Nor is there one set of answers to the questions: Is gay and lesbian sex a sin? Should ministers and rabbis bless gay and lesbian unions? And should faith communities support or oppose civil rights for gay and lesbian people?

The fact is, it only *appears* as if there is one religious view — a negative one — about gay and lesbian people because conservative political and religious organizations, such as the Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family, have in recent years dominated the public discourse on this issue. They have done so through a combination of factors, including: a significant commitment of resources; statements that, whether accurate or not, are designed to attract media attention; and a willingness to be perceived as blatantly prejudiced when it comes to lesbian and gay people.

Yet for the most part, this negative approach stands in stark contrast to that of many other communities of faith and individuals of religious conviction who are wrestling more quietly and humbly with the genuine challenges gay and lesbian people present to a Judeo-Christian ethic that is based on a text written some 2000 years before there was a “homosexual consciousness” in society, let alone a sizable and “out” gay and lesbian community as we know it. And to many of these people, the question is:

Do gay and lesbian people who live full lives in intimate relationship with another sin against God and, therefore, deserve to be restricted from full participation in church or synagogue and, perhaps, society? Or does the church or synagogue sin against gay and lesbian people by restricting the recognition of their human rights and spiritual dignity?

If the question can be stated simply, the answer cannot. Indeed, there is more controversy about religious attitudes and policies toward gay and lesbian people today than there ever has been. Put another way, a spiritual crossfire is taking place in America over not only the civil rights but the human integrity and spiritual dignity of millions of gay and lesbian people.

This report attempts to highlight some of the elements of this crossfire within the nine largest Christian denominations in America and the four movements within Judaism, as ranked by *The Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches: 1998*. They include: The Roman Catholic Church, the Southern Baptist Convention, the United Methodist Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Judaism and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

It should be noted that three largely African-American denominations — the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., the Church of God in Christ and the African Methodist Episcopal Church — are also included, but, unfortunately, there is very little information available on them because they have tended to take relatively quiet or no public positions on the subject.

In this report, each of the Christian denominations and the movements within Judaism are examined in two parts: First, there is a summary of their current positions on questions of the

morality of gay and lesbian sex, the blessing of gay and lesbian unions, the ordination of gay and lesbian ministers and rabbis, and their support of or opposition to civil rights for gay and lesbian people; and, second, there is a report on some of the major developments within each of these groups during 1998, including those that have challenged or changed existing policies and those that have reaffirmed or tightened them.

What will be found, on both points, is not easily summed up because there have been many developments on both sides of the question. On one side, for example, Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, United Methodist and Mormon leaders declared, in various ways, in 1998 that gay and lesbian couples must not be considered family, must not have their unions blessed and must not have the legal right to marry.

Yet at the same time:

- Nearly 2,000 Catholics publicly called on Catholic leaders to speak boldly when the rights of gay and lesbian people are destroyed and when they are maligned by politicians and other religious leaders;
- Some 100 United Methodist ministers, acting in defiance of church rules, declared their intent to bless gay and lesbian unions, saying that the church prohibition violated the Christian gospel of love and was, in itself, an immoral form of institutionalized bigotry; and
- A group of gay and lesbian Mormons charged their church leaders with inspiring violence and hatred against gay and lesbian people.

There are, in short, no clear answers about gay and lesbian people within American faith communities at present. In fact, there appears to be nothing on this issue that is as clear as the religious right might like to insist that it is. There are, instead, growing questions, controversies and uncertainties — in other words, much soul-searching within the leadership of most of the denominations examined here with two clear exceptions: The Southern Baptist Convention and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. These two churches are, at the moment, deeply committed to their beliefs that homosexuality is inherently sinful and that gay people must somehow change their most fundamental selves if they wish to remain church members. Other conservative denominations — such as Roman Catholicism — are willing to accept lesbian and gay followers but they strongly urge celibacy. While this is not much of a concession, it reflects the reality of most lesbian and gay people that their orientation is a largely immutable part of their fundamental selves.

This report does not purport to be a comprehensive account of all that is taking place on this dynamic and complex issue, but it is hoped that it will, at the least, show that the religious community's position on gay and lesbian people is not reducible to messages of "Hate the sin, love the sinner." For too many people of religious conviction today are genuinely questioning what is sinful and what is not.

I. Roman Catholic Church

The Roman Catholic Church is the largest Christian denomination in the United States and one of the most authoritarian. Yet numerous Catholics — including some church leaders — openly challenged and defied the church's position on gay and lesbian people in 1998.

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

The Roman Catholic Church does not consider a gay or lesbian orientation to be sinful because, for many people, it is not a choice, and “morality presumes the freedom to choose.”¹ Yet the church does consider a gay or lesbian orientation “unnatural” and “disordered,” or one of the many manifestations of original sin.²

According to this doctrine, God created a perfect world in which men and women experienced sexual desires only to conceive children within the state of marriage. But when Eve violated God's will by eating an apple from the Tree of Knowledge, she condemned all future generations to the inheritance of that sin, and thus to “unnatural” or “disordered” impulses that had been nonexistent in Eden. With respect to sex, these are said to include all desires to have sex outside of marriage and the possibility of procreation, including: premarital sex, extramarital sex, sex in which birth control devices are used and sex between two men or two women.²

Heterosexual Catholics, therefore, are expected to remain celibate until marriage and, then, refrain from using birth control (a prohibition some 70 percent ignore).³ And gay and lesbian Catholics are expected to remain celibate for life. Failure to do so in either case is judged a sin.

The church, meanwhile, also condemns prejudice and discrimination against gay and lesbian people as sinful; permits celibate gay and lesbian Catholics to fully participate in the church; and supports the basic human rights of all gay and lesbian people.⁴

1998 Developments

Summary. Several cardinals and bishops lobbied against extending marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples in 1998; the National Conference of Catholic Bishops backpedaled on a 1997 statement of love and acceptance for gay and lesbian people; and a popular priest was dismissed after blessing gay and lesbian unions. Meanwhile, an international organization representing 140 Catholic groups (45 from the United States) called for a more inclusive pope to succeed John Paul II. And numerous clergy and lay Catholics spoke up in support of gay and lesbian Catholics.

Revised Letter to Parents of Gay and Lesbian Children

After urging parents to love and accept their gay and lesbian children in 1997, a National Conference of Catholic Bishops committee slightly tempered its message of acceptance in 1998.

“The direction expressed in the original letter was much more on the side of saying that homosexuality is not a choice,” said Bishop Thomas Gumbleton of Detroit. “Now, it says that maybe you could prevent it from happening. That’s not there explicitly, but its just subtle enough that you could read it that way.”⁵

In their 1997 version, “Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers,” the bishops urged parents to love their children, saying, “God does not not love someone any less simply because he or she is homosexual.” It encouraged priests and pastoral ministers to welcome gay and lesbian members, help promote family support groups and in various and subtle ways let people know that they were willing to talk about it.⁶

And, in its most controversial section, “Always Our Children” suggested that a parent’s response to a child who had gay or lesbian sex should depend upon the child’s age. Parents of adult gay or lesbian children were told to encourage them to remain chaste. But parents of adolescents were advised: “The best approach may be a ‘wait and see attitude,’ because a few incidents did not necessarily mean the child was gay or lesbian.”

The 1998 version which, unlike the earlier one, came with the Vatican’s stamp of approval, maintained the message that parents should love their gay or lesbian children. But the bishops’ advice on acceptance was modified as follows:

Where the 1997 message suggested that parents adopt a “wait and see attitude” with adolescents, the 1998 version suggested that parents take a more active approach:

“What is called for on the part of parents is an approach which does not presume that your child has developed homosexual orientation and which will help you maintain a loving relationship, while you provide information, encouragement and moral guidance. Parents must always be vigilant about their children’s behavior and exercise responsible interventions when necessary.”⁷

Where the 1997 message quoted the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as saying, “Everyone ... should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity,” the 1998 version deleted the reference.⁷

Where the 1997 message noted that a homosexual orientation was not considered sinful, the 1998 version added a footnote to clarify that it was still “objectively disordered.”⁷

And where the 1997 message urged pastoral ministers to make themselves available to discuss homosexuality, the 1998 version omitted the suggestion.⁷

Church Leaders Oppose Marriage and Domestic Partner Benefits

Church leaders in Alaska, Hawaii, New York and Philadelphia lobbied against equal marriage and domestic partner benefits for gay and lesbian couples, marking a growth in Catholic political activism against gay and lesbian people.

Alaska and Hawaii. Three Alaska bishops mailed a letter to 40,000 Catholics urging them to support an amendment to the state constitution that would restrict marriage rights to heterosexual couples, alleging that the future of the nation and the church depended upon it.⁸

“Marriage,” they stated, “is much too personal to be defined by the abstract word, relationship.” In short, they wrote, it depends on the ability to bear children together, and homosexual people do not bring to marriage what marriage requires.⁸

A similar ballot issue in Hawaii sparked even more vigorous activism from Honolulu Bishop Francis X. DiLorenzo, who asked his mainland colleagues to urge their congregations to contribute to Save Traditional Marriage, a group attempting to limit marriage to heterosexuals.⁹

Both initiatives were passed.

“The best approach may be a ‘wait and see attitude,’ because a few incidents did not necessarily mean the child was gay or lesbian.”

New York and Philadelphia. During a Sunday homily, New York Cardinal John J. O'Connor spoke from the pulpit of St. Patrick's Cathedral to denounce a domestic partnership bill that would benefit gay and lesbian couples and unmarried heterosexuals (and had been proposed and introduced by two Catholics: Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani and City Council Speaker Peter F. Vallone.)¹⁰

"Marriage matters supremely to every person and every institution in our society," O'Connor said. "It is imperative, in my judgment, that no law be passed contrary to natural moral law and Western tradition by virtually legislating that marriage does not matter." Doing so, he added, could provoke "moral and cultural changes in our society neither anticipated nor traditionally desired from our earliest days as a people."¹⁰

O'Connor's statement was described as "pushing the envelope a little on the political use of the pulpit," according to Dr. R. Scott Appleby, director of the Cushman Center for the Study of American Catholicism, at the University of Notre Dame.¹⁰

Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua of Philadelphia, meanwhile, attended a City Council hearing to oppose a similar bill. The archdiocese also sponsored advertisements and made several public statements on the issue.¹¹

Both bills were signed into law.

Priest Suspended for Blessing Gay and Lesbian Unions

A popular priest in Rochester, N.Y., was suspended for blessing gay and lesbian unions, serving communion to Protestants and allowing a woman to perform duties on the altar. But his congregation immediately asked for his reinstatement.¹²

While serving for 22 years at the Corpus Christi Church, the Rev. James Callan had made a special effort to reach out to marginalized groups, including the poor, homeless, handicapped, women and gay and lesbian people. In the process, he increased his congregation from 200 to 4,000 members. Complaints from a local conservative group and, apparently, the Vatican, however, prompted Rochester Bishop Matthew Clark to suspend Callan in August.¹²

Members of his congregation attempted to win his reinstatement but were unsuccessful. They have since worked to organize a parish in exile.¹³

Public Discussions about Gay and Lesbian People Increase

A number of parishes, dioceses and organizations engaged in

discussions about — and more concrete acts of support for — gay and lesbian Catholics. For example:

- Approximately 10 bishops, 130 Catholic organizations and 1,800 individuals signed a pledge calling upon church leaders to stand up for the rights of gay and lesbian people. The pledge, which was co-sponsored by New Ways Ministry¹⁴ and Pax Christi USA, was published as a full-page ad in *The New York Times* and stated in part:

"We pledge to find new ways to bring the peace of Christ to the situation of violence against gay and lesbian people. We call on all Catholics and people of good will to look into their hearts and weed out violent perceptions and behaviors. We ask our bishops and church leaders to speak boldly when the rights of gay and lesbian people are destroyed and when they are maligned by politicians and other religious leaders."¹⁵

- The National Conference of Catholic Bishops hosted a panel, sponsored by the bridge-building New Ways Ministry on ways to promote outreach to gay and lesbian Catholics.¹⁶
- The diocese in San Bernardino, Calif., formed a committee to examine the needs of gay and lesbian Catholics and announced plans to establish an office of gay and lesbian affairs. Said the Rev. Howard Lincoln, spokesman for the diocese: "It is profane to assume God values the souls of homosexuals less than heterosexuals."¹⁷
- The Archdiocese of Cincinnati invited parents of gay and lesbian children to discuss "Always Our Children" with Auxiliary Bishop Carl Moeddel.¹⁸
- Workshops for parents of gay and lesbian children also were held in Appleton, Madison and Milwaukee, Wis.; Philadelphia, Scranton and Bethlehem, Pa.; Nashville and Memphis; Evansville and Oldenburg, Ind.; Cincinnati; and Lexington, Ky. They were conducted by New Ways Ministries staff and founders, the Rev. Robert Nugent and Sister Jeannine Gramick.¹⁶

Calls for a More Inclusive Pope

More than 130 Catholic groups — including Dignity/USA¹⁹ and New Ways Ministry — sent a letter to Pope John Paul II and cardinals worldwide urging that the next head of the church be someone who would "consider the possibility of welcoming into ministry all those qualified whatever their gender, marital status or sexual orientation." Entitled "A Pope for the Time to Come," the letter called for a leader who would foster a diversity of opinions and respect the consciences of Catholics who desired a dialogue on church teachings and policies. It was issued by the Versailles, France-based International Movement, We Are the Church.²⁰

II. Southern Baptist Convention

The Southern Baptist Convention, which has grown increasingly fundamentalist in recent years, is the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. It also is the most public in its denunciations of gay and lesbian people.

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) goes further than most Christian denominations in condemning the morality not only of gay or lesbian sex but anyone with a gay or lesbian orientation. In 1996, for example, it declared: “Even desire to engage in a homosexual relationship is always sinful, impure, degrading, shameful, unnatural, indecent and perverted.”²¹

The SBC also is unusual in that it expresses antipathy not only for gay and lesbian people but for heterosexuals and institutions that acknowledge, accept or support them. Doing so, they argue, threatens the wrath of God and, thereby, the nation’s security.

In this vein, the church has passed numerous resolutions on the subject since 1976, repeatedly asserting its commitment to preach, teach and politically organize against gay and lesbian people and their supporters. Unlike many Christian denominations that oppose discrimination against gay and lesbian people in civil society, the SBC also has gone on record as supporting it.²²

Moreover, the SBC, which traditionally permitted congregations to make their own decisions on morality questions, issued a rare amendment to its constitution in 1992, stating that it would bar any congregation that acted to “affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior.” Included, for example, would be those congregations that permitted the blessing of gay and lesbian unions and the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy.²²

To support its actions, the convention typically cites five biblical passages as alleged evidence of God’s views on homosexuality. While discussed elsewhere (See The Bible and Homosexuality, Appendix 1), it should be noted here that Southern Baptists embrace a fiercely literal translation of the Bible — which they call a “perfect” rendering of God’s word — and, in the process, dismiss several scientific, cultural and linguistic considerations acknowledged by other people of faith.²⁴

Among the factors the Southern Baptists dismiss as irrelevant:

- That translating and interpreting the Bible, which was originally written in ancient languages, is an inherently complex process that sometimes results in cultural misinterpretations;
- That recent cultural changes have permitted the development of gay and lesbian identities in a way unknown in Biblical times and, thereby, may call

into question traditional interpretations of passages that appear to condemn homosexuality. (Other scriptural passages that require death for adulterers and children who curse their parents are, however, willingly dismissed with the times.)

- That studies suggest genes may play a role in sexual orientation. (Southern Baptists insist that orientation is “mostly if not entirely a matter of external influence, learned behavior, acquired taste and personal choice.”)²¹

The convention, finally, insists that gay and lesbian people remain celibate or, more commonly, change their orientation through prayer and controversial reparative therapy techniques, which the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Medical Association and other similar professional associations have judged unproven and potentially harmful.²³

1998 Developments

Summary. The Southern Baptist Convention amended its creed in 1998 to exclude gay and lesbian couples from the definition of family and condemned President Clinton for his efforts to prohibit discrimination against gay and lesbian employees in the federal government. But at least one church joined a small but growing number of congregations to break with the convention and support its gay and lesbian members.

Gay and Lesbian People Excised from the Notion of Family

Declaring this an “era when the family is under attack as never before,” the Southern Baptist Convention voted to exclude gay and lesbian people from its definition of family during its annual convention in 1998. A “family,” the convention stated in the first amendment to its *Baptist Faith and Message Statement* in 35 years, is a unit “composed of persons related to one another by marriage, blood or adoption,” and a “marriage” is “the uniting of one man and one woman.”²⁵

A related commentary added that marriage “cannot” be open to anyone but heterosexuals, and discouraged members from weighing any evidence on the subject but Scripture. It stated in part:

“Believers must resist any claims for sexual relationships that biblically have been declared illicit or perverse lest they fall prey to an accommodation to the spirit of the age. Deviation from God’s plan for marriage mars the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and distorts the oneness God intended in the sexual union between one woman and one man. The perversion of homosexuality defies even child-birth, since it negates natural conception (Romans 1:18-32). ... Doctrine and practice, whether in the home or the church, are not to be determined according to modern cultural, sociological and ecclesiastical trends or according to personal emotional whims;

*rather, Scripture is to be the final authority in all matters of faith and conduct (2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 3:12; 2 Peter 1:20-21).”*²⁵

Anti-Discrimination Measure Condemned

The convention also passed a resolution condemning President Clinton for signing an executive order that prohibited job discrimination against gay and lesbian federal civilian employees. Moreover, it called upon Congress to nullify the order and restated its opposition to “all efforts to provide government endorsement, sanction, recognition, acceptance or civil rights advantage on the basis of homosexuality.”²⁶

Georgia Votes To Expel Churches that Support Gay and Lesbian People

Amid controversy, the Georgia Baptist Convention voted to exclude any church that “knowingly takes, or has taken, any action to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior.”²⁷

“I want to ask one simple question,” said the Rev. Bill Self, pastor of John’s Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga. “This year, the homosexuals. Who’s next? Churches that receive African-Americans? Churches that allow women in the ministry?”²⁸

The Rev. Frank Page of Warren Baptist Church in Augusta, Ga., and an executive committee member, replied: “Anyone who desires and follows a direction directly opposed to the word of God. They are next.”²⁷

Congregation Breaks Ranks To Support Gay and Lesbian People

Yet at least one church went against the national and state convention in 1998 by voting to permit its ministers to bless gay and lesbian unions. The Wake Forest Baptist Church, an independent church on the campus of Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C., also asked God to bless “all loving, committed and exclusive relationships between two people.”²⁹

The action placed Wake Forest in the company of a small band of churches in North Carolina that have openly supported gay and lesbian people in defiance of the convention. Others include the Olin T. Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., and the Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in nearby Raleigh.²⁹

A 325-member congregation, Wake Forest has at least a dozen openly gay and lesbian members, including two openly gay deacons. It was that fact, church leaders said, that led the congregation to stand by its members instead of the convention.²⁹

III. United Methodist Church

The United Methodist Church is the second-largest Protestant denomination in the United States, and the most mainstream. It is deeply divided in its policies over gay and lesbian people and the outcome of this controversy, as many religion observers have reported, may have widespread implications for other denominations.

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

The central teaching of the United Methodist Church on gay and lesbian people reflects what some consider to be the church's two minds on the subject: It supports gay and lesbian people as having the same sacred worth as heterosexuals; it welcomes them as members; and it commits itself to the ministry of all people, regardless of orientation. Yet it also considers sexual activity by gay and lesbian people sinful.

The relevant passage in *The Book of Discipline*, or rule book, states:

*"Homosexual persons no less than heterosexual persons are individuals of sacred worth. All persons need the ministry and guidance of the church in their struggles for human fulfillment, as well as their spiritual and emotional care of a fellowship that enables reconciling relations with God, with others, and with self. Although we do not condone the practice of homosexuality and consider this practice incompatible with Christian teaching, we affirm that God's grace is available to all. We commit ourselves to be in ministry for and with all persons."*³⁰

Fueling this sense of two minds, *The Book of Discipline* also states that sexuality is "God's good gift to all persons" and that people may be "fully human only when their sexuality is acknowledged and affirmed by themselves, the church and society." But, again, it excludes gay and lesbian people from this gift by asserting that "sexual relations are only clearly affirmed in the marriage bond."³¹

More specifically, the Methodist position might be summed up as follows:

- A gay or lesbian person is considered equal to a heterosexual person.
- Gay or lesbian sex is regarded as a sin.
- Gay and lesbian people are welcome as church members.
- Ministers are forbidden from blessing gay and lesbian unions;
- "Self-avowed practicing" (noncelibate) gay and lesbian individuals may not be ordained.
- The church supports basic human rights and civil liberties for all gay and lesbian people.

On the issue of rights and liberties, for example, *The Book of Discipline* states:

"We see a clear issue of simple justice in protecting their rightful claims, where they have shared material resources, pensions, guardian relationships,

mutual powers of attorney, and other such lawful claims typically attendant to contractual relationships that involve shared contributions, responsibilities and liabilities, and equal protection before the law.”³²

1998 Developments

Summary. The United Methodist Church experienced the most public and, apparently, divisive controversy over its policies toward gay and lesbian people in 1998. The controversy centered on the right of ministers to bless gay and lesbian unions, as a number of ministers defied a newly stated prohibition on doing so — sparking a court trial, a judicial council ruling and, in turn, the promise of an act of mass disobedience.

Minister Accused of Breaking Rules, Church Accused of Sinning

The year of controversy began Jan. 23, 1998, when the Rev. Jimmy Creech, senior pastor of First United Methodist Church in Omaha, was charged with violating church law by having blessed the union of two women three months before.

It was not the first time that Creech (or other United Methodist ministers) had blessed a gay or lesbian union. But it was the first time since 1996, when a prohibition was added to *The Book of Discipline*, stating: “Ceremonies that celebrate homosexual unions shall not be conducted by our ministers and shall not be conducted in our churches.”³³

Creech welcomed the trial, declaring that it was time to put the church itself on trial for a policy that was “wrong, unjust, discriminatory and inconsistent with the spirit of Christ and our Wesleyan and Methodist traditions.” The church, he added, was more responsible than any other institution for “the sin of heterosexism” and people of conscience must fight such policies for the “evil” they represent.³⁴

Likening the church’s position to past practices of “institutionalized racism,” Creech argued that its refusal to bless gay and lesbian unions (and ordain gay and lesbian ministers in monogamous relationships) reflected a value system “contrary to the Christian gospel” because it denies “integrity, dignity and wholeness to persons who are the children of God created in God’s image.”³⁴

Creech Explains Himself

With these strong words from a heterosexual minister who had served in the Methodist Church for 27 years, Creech also issued an explanation of how he arrived at this position. “Sexual orientation had never been a concern or interest of mine,” he wrote, until a gay church member announced that he could no longer

belong where he was considered unworthy. Uncertain what to think, Creech began to study the works of biblical scholars, psychologists and social scientists on the subject and learned:³⁴

- “There was no understanding of sexual orientation in the culture and time when Scripture was written,” nor even a word for homosexuality or homosexual;
- The biblical references that condemn sexual behavior between men are “all within contexts related to violence, idolatry, promiscuity and exploitation,” and it is these behaviors, not same-sex relations, that are condemned; and
- “There are no condemnatory biblical references to same-sex sexual behavior between two people who are in a mutually loving, nurturing, caring and supportive relationship.”

From these facts, Creech reached the conclusion: “Sexual orientation is not a moral issue; it is morally neutral. Sexual ethics are simple: Sexual relationships should be mutual, non-exploitative, nurturing and loving.”³⁴

Jury Acquits Minister

When the trial opened in March, the focus was not on questions of morality but on the more procedural question: Was the ban on blessing gay and lesbian unions merely advisory, as Creech argued in his defense, or was it church law?

The question was relevant because the prohibition appeared in the rule book’s “Social Principles” section, which many Methodists considered advisory only. Indeed, Creech was the first minister ever charged with breaking a social principle.³⁵

A jury of his peers narrowly acquitted Creech just hours after deliberations began. But the controversy was far from over. More than 90 ministers issued a “Statement of Commitment,” declaring that they, too, would perform rites of union with all couples, regardless of gender. Meanwhile, numerous bishops and state conferences requested that the Judicial Council, or Methodist supreme court, settle the question of whether the social principles statement reflected church law.³⁶⁻³⁸

Judicial Council Ruling

In August, the Judicial Council declared that the prohibition had been intended as law and, therefore, “has the effect of church law, notwithstanding its placement.” Those who violated it could be tried and face penalties as severe as suspension from office and expulsion from the denomination. Creech, whose contract had not been renewed, urged his fellow ministers to defy the ruling.³⁹⁻⁴¹

Chicago Minister Defies Ruling

The Rev. Gregory Dell, pastor of the Broadway United Methodist Church in Chicago, had blessed gay and lesbian unions for 17 years. Indeed, when the Judicial Council handed down its decision, he already had plans to bless the union of another male couple. One month later, he proceeded to do so.⁴¹

In a letter to his congregation, Dell explained his act of defiance:

*"Some people asked if I wasn't afraid of what would happen to me if I did the service. I said that I was more afraid of what I would be if I didn't. ... I simply cannot conceive of excluding people from the ministry of the church because of their identity. ... When an expression of someone's identity involves the making of holy vows for faithfulness and ministry, the church should understand itself to be privileged in offering a blessing."*⁴²

One month later, Chicago Bishop Joseph Sprague filed a complaint against Dell for failure to "uphold the Order and the Discipline of the United Methodist Church." Yet Sprague reported in a public statement that he, too, had a "theological

and pastoral disagreement" with the church policy. In fact, he had blessed two such unions himself; had led a movement to remove anti-gay and -lesbian language from Methodist teachings in the 1980s; and, while a candidate for bishop, had promised to advocate for the blessing of gay and lesbian members.⁴³

Forced despite his own beliefs to file charges against Dell, Sprague told a reporter: "I hope the whole church will learn what a terrible box we have put ourselves in."⁴³

Mass Disobedience

Arguably the most dramatic challenge to the ban, however, was still to come. In October, the Rev. Don Fado of St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Sacramento, Calif., announced that more than 60 pastors would defy the ruling in an act of "ecclesiastical disobedience." That is, all would stand together on an altar to bless the union of two female church members who lived in a nearby retirement community. The ceremony was held Jan. 16, 1999.⁴⁴

Toward Understanding African-American Churches

By Daryl Herrschaft

A REVIEW OF THREE COMPENDIA OF OFFICIAL CHURCH STATEMENTS (*The Churches Speak on Homosexuality: Official Statements from Religious Bodies and Ecumenical Organizations*: 1991, by J. Gordon Melton; *Homosexuality and World Religions*: 1993, by Arlene Swidler; and *Churches and Homosexuality: An Overview of Recent Official Church Statements on Sexual Orientation*: Ecumenical Review, 1998, by Wolfgang Lienemann) on how these three predominantly African-American denominations have handled the issue of homosexuality revealed no official policy statements from their governing bodies. And several scholars agree that there is no reason to expect such official proclamations. "It is useful to think of these churches as associations of congregations where individual churches maintain a great deal of autonomy in setting policy," Yale University Chaplain Frederick J. Streets told the Human Rights Campaign. Often the only material for examination consists of comments from individual pastors and unofficial statements by church leaders.

As such, some diversity of opinion exists within each denomination, but it is also generally accepted that all three of these churches hold conservative views of homosexuality. "There are churches that are different, but these churches are very conservative on the issue of sexuality," Kelly Brown-Douglas, a professor at Howard University School of Divinity and author of *Sexuality and the Black Church*, said in an interview with HRC.

In her opinion and according to several other religion scholars, these congregations would consider homosexuality a sin and would not bless same-sex unions, basing their beliefs on biblical passages. "There is a long history of shrouding beliefs in a sacred canopy to secure a biblical tradition of homophobia, while ignoring the black community's long biblical tradition of liberation," Douglas told HRC.

Several groups are engaged in efforts to break the silence surrounding sexuality in African-American churches. The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice is scheduled to hold its third annual "Black Religious Summits on Sexuality," in July 1999. Discussions of sexual orientation are planned.

Herrschaft is HRC's research coordinator.

IV. National Baptist Convention USA Inc.

This largely African-American denomination has not issued any public statements on its attitudes or policies toward gay and lesbian people. And Dr. S.C. Cureton, the recently installed president of the convention, told the Human Rights Campaign that the convention does not have an official position on homosexuality. However, he volunteered his own personal views (“All the ministers in the churches that I know of believe that God can change anyone. First, you must admit that you are wrong, that what you are doing is sinful, and then ask for change,”) and said “most people would agree” with them.⁴⁵

In an article about gay and lesbian people in black churches, published in the October 1998 issue of *Charisma*, Valerie G. Lowe reported on the basis of interviews that “although Christians have been commissioned to preach the good news of God’s forgiveness to every person — including gays and lesbians — many African-American churches are cold and inattentive toward homosexuals.”

Moreover, the article goes on to repeatedly refer to homosexuality as a sin and to chide black churches for their “hesitation to lead people out of homosexuality into a place of healing.” Indeed, “outreach ministries” are assumed to be places where people try to change gay and lesbian Christians’ sexual orientation; but they are said to be “almost non-existent in African-American congregations.”⁴⁶



V. Church of God in Christ

A largely African-American denomination, the Church of God in Christ similarly has not issued public statements on its attitudes or policies toward gay and lesbian people. At the same time, the Church of God in Christ does not engage in “gay-bashing” or refuse worship to gay and lesbian Christians, according to the Rev. Damon Eskridge, director of the HIV and AIDS Ministry at the West Angeles Church of God in Christ in Los Angeles. But, like the National Baptist Convention USA Inc., the Church of God in Christ is unofficially disapproving of homosexuality. That is, while the denomination lacks an official policy on the subject, according to Eskridge, ministers and members of this Pentecostal denomination tend to believe in the infallibility of the Bible, and that Scripture roundly condemns homosexuality. Consequently, there is essentially no debate or discussion about the merits or demerits of blessing gay and lesbian unions or ordaining gay and lesbian ministers, for example. But there also is no official statement on the matter and few sermons directed against homosexuality, says Eskridge, “because it is no secret that gays and lesbians are in the church from the highest levels on down.”⁴⁷

VI. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

The Evangelical
Lutheran Church in
America is the largest
Lutheran body in the
United States and
significantly more
accepting of gay and
lesbian people than the
2.6-million-member
Lutheran Church-
Missouri Synod.

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

Unlike most Christian denominations, the ELCA has issued several documents about gay and lesbian people but no official judgment about their morality or, more pointedly, about the morality of gay and lesbian sex.⁴⁸

A 1996 statement, entitled “Sexuality: Some Common Convictions,” for example, never mentions homosexuality. Rather it asserts: “Human sexuality was created good for the purposes of expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure.” Absent is the common contention that God intended sexuality strictly or primarily for procreation.⁴⁹

Moreover, the ELCA identifies a misuse or sinful expression of sexuality as that which “harms and demeans persons and relationships,” such as: adultery, abuse, promiscuity, prostitution, practices that spread sexually transmitted diseases, pornography and sexuality in media and advertising. Sex between men or women is not included.⁴⁹

The ELCA also issued a statement welcoming gay and lesbian members during a 1991 Churchwide Assembly — with no conditions, such as celibacy, attached to that welcome. It stated simply: “Gay and lesbian people, as individuals created by God, are welcome to participate fully in the life of the congregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.”⁵⁰

In 1993, the assembly further declared “strong opposition to all forms of verbal or physical harassment or assault of persons because of their sexual orientation.” It also asserted the church’s support for the civil rights of all persons, regardless of sexual orientation.⁵⁰

Both statements were reaffirmed in 1995.⁵¹

On the issue of blessing gay and lesbian unions, the church has a more ambivalent position. On one hand, ELCA bishops have stated that the church does not approve of ministers’ blessing gay and lesbian unions as an official action of the church. However, there is no policy for disciplining one who chooses to do so.⁵²

The church’s policy on ordination, finally, is subject to the most controversy. According to current policy, gay and lesbian people may be

ordained as clergy only if they remain celibate. But a number of church members, including some in positions of authority, are challenging this restriction, and the General Assembly has called for the ELCA Division for Church in Society to report on the issue in 1999.⁵³⁻⁵⁴

1998 Developments

Summary. The ELCA prohibition on noncelibate gay and lesbian ministers dominated the news, as at least three gay and lesbian pastors were forced out of the ministry. In a more supportive vein, the church also prepared an official report on how congregations may better minister to gay and lesbian members and sponsored a gay and lesbian awareness week in church headquarters.

Three Pastors Forced Out

In Iowa. The ELCA defrocked the pastor of Lord of Life Church in Ames, Iowa, on charges of being “a practicing homosexual.” The Rev. Steve Sabin had ministered for nearly 12 years when he was confronted by a bishop newly assigned to the area, who said he had heard rumors that Sabin was gay. Sabin acknowledged that he was, and the bishop filed charges against him for violating the ELCA rule that gay and lesbian ministers abstain from sexual relationships.⁵⁴ Numerous ministers are reported to have resigned when so confronted, but Sabin refused to — forcing the church to bring him to trial and the issue to light. The trial itself was closed to the press and the public, including Sabin’s partner. But his congregation showed tremendous support, as several hundred members attended special services beforehand and many spoke in his defense.⁵⁵

One church member, the Rev. Russ Melby, said: “Steve Sabin is one of the most articulate preachers and capable pastors that I have ever met. If the ELCA chooses to expel him from the clergy roster, then it is choosing to expel one of the best.”⁵⁵

The church, nonetheless, did so.

Missouri. Misreading the ELCA’s welcome to gay and lesbian people, the Rev. Jane Ralph of King of Glory Lutheran Church in Independence, Mo., was forced to resign from the ministry after telling her bishop that she was in a monogamous committed relationship with a woman.⁵⁶

In late 1997, Ralph had gone to her bishop to explain: “I can’t simultaneously live this [her relationship] out and remain a closeted clergy person. Beyond this, I can’t preach a gospel of grace while on such a fundamental level not claim it for myself. I can’t witness to the liberating love of God while my actions deny that it is for me.”⁵⁶

She expected to resign from the congregation and be reassigned to another congregation that was more welcoming of gay and lesbian people. But, after 20 years of service, she was forced to resign from the ministry altogether.⁵⁶

California. The Rev. Jim Bischoff, pastor of San Marcos Lutheran Church in San Diego, had ministered for 20 years as a celibate gay man before his loneliness grew into a depression so profound that he could barely get out of bed. He finally allowed himself to be in a relationship.⁵⁷

But when a church council member revealed his relationship, and Bischoff decided to do the same before the entire congregation, his church grew divided. Opponents urged members to refuse communion from Bischoff, saying that if he remained their pastor, they would be thrown out of the ELCA, members

“Human sexuality was created good for the purposes of expressing love and generating life, for mutual companionship and pleasure.”

would leave and they would be unable to pay the mortgage on their building.⁵⁷

Bischoff resigned to avoid causing continued conflict. But a group of supporters decided to go with him and asked him to helm them to start an “open and affirming church,” independent of the ELCA, called The Church of All Saints. Their mission, they said, was to worship with “no divisiveness, only unity ... no exclusion, only inclusion ... no hate, only love.”⁵⁷

Conference Examines Ordination Policy

Approximately 280 church members gathered to discuss the ELCA ban on ordaining noncelibate gay and lesbian ministers at the Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis in October. Entitled “Here I Stand,” the conference invoked Martin Luther, the 16th-century leader of the Protestant Reformation, who refused to retract his challenge to the Roman Catholic Church, saying: “Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise.”⁵⁸

Report Prepared on How to Minister to Gay and Lesbian Members

In an effort to provide congregations with an official resource on how better to outreach to gay and lesbian members — and reportedly the first such action of its kind — a church com-

mittee visited more than a dozen congregations in 1998 to learn about their most successful methods. The findings have been analyzed and presented in a report, expected to be released in 1999.⁴⁸

Church Sponsors Gay and Lesbian Awareness Week

Citing the ELCA’s support of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, Bishop H. George Anderson endorsed a gay and lesbian awareness week in its Chicago headquarters. Entitled “Gay, Lesbian and Straight Working Together Week,” it featured a talk by the president of the Pacific Lutheran Seminary, who argued that the thrust of Jesus’ teachings was to reach out to all people with grace and love. Other speakers focused on myths about gay and lesbian people, the experiences of welcoming congregations, and the stories of gay and lesbian Lutherans and their parents. Anderson said he hoped that the 65 regions within the ELCA would sponsor similar efforts in the future.⁴⁸

VII. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)

Despite its relatively recent and controversial beginnings in 1803, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has become one of the largest Christian denominations in the United States today — due in large part to its insistence that members rigorously proselytize. Like the Southern Baptist Convention, it recently has become a major public opponent of gay and lesbian people.⁶⁰

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

The Mormon church is as fiercely antagonistic toward gay and lesbian people as the Southern Baptist Convention. But unlike the Southern Baptists, Mormon leaders reject the very notion of a gay or lesbian orientation, typically using the phrase “so-called” when referring to gay and lesbian people, and arguing that those who feel attracted to someone of the same sex are either misguided or willfully sinful.⁶¹

With a mission that leaders define as that of preparing members for life in heaven, the church teaches that an afterlife is available only to men and women who marry or “desire to do what is right but through no fault of their own are unable.”⁶²

What is right, they say, was made evident by the biblical account that God commanded Adam and Eve to procreate. Through that act, they argue, God indicated that he created all men and women to marry and raise children, and that those who strayed from this would “bring upon individuals, communities, and nations the calamities foretold by ancient and modern prophets.”⁶³

Homosexuality is alleged to be Satan’s work, i.e., the devil trying to thwart God’s plan for humankind, according to Elder Dallin H. Oaks, a member of one of the highest church bodies, the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles.⁶¹ Indeed, a booklet addressed to Mormon children groups gay and lesbian sex with rape and incest as “sexual perversions” that “the Lord specifically forbids.”⁶⁴

The church, moreover, considers feelings and thoughts of attraction to the same sex and the acting on that attraction immoral. Sexual acts are considered more seriously immoral than just thinking about them; and thinking about them is deemed more seriously immoral than just feeling the impulses. But, the church suggests, feelings can lead to thoughts and, in turn, to actions. Thereby, members are taught to resist and repent of all feelings, thoughts and acts based on same-sex attraction.⁶²

Those who feel attracted are typically urged to undergo controversial reparative therapy counseling, which the American Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association and American Medical

Association, have judged unproven and potentially harmful.²⁵

Members who have acted on such feelings also are typically disciplined through probation, disfellowship (exclusion from sacraments) or excommunication. Those who refuse to repent — or insist that their feelings are integral to who they are — almost always receive the most severe discipline of excommunication. This means they are called to a trial, barred from membership and, according to Mormon belief, stripped of “the spirit” and turned over to Satan.⁶¹

It follows, therefore, that the debates taking place within other denominations about blessing gay and lesbian unions and ordaining gay and lesbian clergy are nonexistent in the Mormon church.

1998 Developments

Summary. The Mormon church became significantly more public in its combat against gay and lesbian people by contributing more than \$1 million to block gay and lesbian couples from the right to marry. The group, Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons, meanwhile, stepped up its challenge to the church, charging that it inspires anti-gay violence.

Funding to Block Gay and Lesbian Couples from Marrying

In an unusually overt act of political activism, the Mormon church contributed \$500,000 to the Alaska Family Coalition and \$600,000 to Save Traditional Marriage in Hawaii. Both groups were devoted to winning support for state ballot measures that restricted marriage to heterosexual couples.⁶⁵

With the contributions ranging from 300 to 500 times what the recipient groups had previously raised, they helped trounce supporters of marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples both in advertising and at the polls. Prior to the Mormon funding, for example, polls showed Alaska voters were evenly divided. But after the cash infusion, the ballot initiatives won 69 percent of the vote.⁶⁵

While the church described the act as an effort to preserve marriage (for heterosexuals,) gay and lesbian Mormons said it seemed to be an effort to cloak themselves in the wraps of traditional marriage in order to overcome their own controversial history as polygamists.⁶¹

A Vow to Continue Fighting Rights for Gay and Lesbian People

Mormon President Gordon B. Hinckley delivered a speech at the General Conference that reflected the church’s new-found

willingness to publicly fight equal rights for gay and lesbian people. In it, he said:

“People inquire about our position on those who consider themselves so-called gays and lesbians. My response is that we love them as sons and daughters of God. They may have certain inclinations, which are powerful and which may be difficult to control. Most people have inclinations of one kind or another at various times. If they do not act upon these inclinations, then they can go forward as do all other members of the church. If they violate the law of chastity and the moral standards of the church, then they are subject to the discipline of the church, just as others are. We want to help these people, to strengthen them, to assist them with their problems and to help them with their difficulties. But we cannot stand idle if they indulge in immoral activity, if they try to uphold and defend and live in a so-called same-sex marriage situation. To permit such would be to make light of the very serious and sacred foundation of God-sanctioned marriage and its very purpose, the rearing of families.”⁶⁶

Gay Mormons Charge the Church With Inspiring Hatred

With the vicious beating and death of University of Wyoming student Matthew Shepard just a short time after Hinckley’s General Conference speech, a gay and lesbian Mormon group issued a letter to Hinckley and the news media, charging that the church fuels anti-gay violence.

“We believe that such teachings, regardless of intentions, inevitably lead to suspicion, mistrust, and often violence against gays and lesbians. Surely it is no surprise when a group that is routinely condemned is treated with contempt by those who believe such condemnations.”⁶⁷

The group Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons challenged Hinckley to match the contribution the church made to block marriage rights for gay and lesbian couples with a contribution to fight violence against gay and lesbian people, echoing his own words with:

“Can church leaders stand idle while this kind of hate is indulged in? Is not this kind of hostility at least as immoral as homosexual activity itself in your eyes, and at least an equal danger to society and family? Does not this behavior make light of the sacred truth, that all humans are created in God’s image and of equal value and worth, regardless of beliefs or actions?”⁶⁷

Hinckley did not respond.⁶¹

VIII. Judaism

Judaism is comprised of four major movements in the United States, with a total of 3.9 million members. From most to least conservative on issues of concern to gay and lesbian people, they are: the Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist movements.

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

There is no monolithic Jewish position on gay and lesbian people but, rather, different positions among the four major movements — and, as in Christianity, significant controversies within some of the movements. To a great extent, the differences in their positions are determined by their attitudes toward changing social conditions. The movements that most strongly reject the need for religion to change with the times most roundly condemn gay and lesbian people. Those that believe change is necessary are most accepting. The Conservative movement, which maintains a middle ground, appears to be the most divided. More specifically:

Orthodox Judaism, which seeks to follow the Torah according to the letter of the law, does not recognize a gay or lesbian orientation and rejects sexual relations between gay and lesbian people as sinful. It rests its judgment on two passages from the Book of Leviticus, which are seen as unambiguous evidence of God's views on the matter.⁶⁹

- *"You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination."* (18:22)
- *"If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them."* (20:13)

Jewish law elaborates by stating, in more specific terms, that Leviticus forbids anal penetration between two men. The Torah does not address sexual relations between women, but Jewish law calls on them to avoid it.⁶⁹

Yet Orthodox Jews also appear to be uncomfortable about sex between gay and lesbian people because it does not lead to procreation and the propagation of the Jewish community, according to one gay Orthodox rabbi who wrote an unsigned piece on the subject in a recent issue of *Tikkun*.⁷⁰

"To a people that was nearly destroyed 50 years ago, gay love seems irresponsible," he wrote. "Gay people's sexuality is thus [considered] a diversion from the tasks of Jewish family and the survival that it symbolizes, and is perceived as marginal to the Jewish community because we are shirkers of this most central and sacred of communal tasks."

Conservative Judaism, which maintains most of the traditional rituals of Orthodox Judaism but recognizes the need to change with overriding contemporary conditions, takes a decidedly mixed position on gay and lesbian people.⁶⁰

Some within the movement consider gay and lesbian sex to be a sin, and some do not, according to Rabbi Eliot Dorff of the University of Judaism in Los Angeles. Some argue that gay and lesbian people should remain celibate, and others (including Dorff) argue that such a position is cruel.⁷¹

The movement has officially agreed, however, that homosexuality can no longer be considered an “abomination,” and it would be very unusual for a Conservative rabbi to call a gay or lesbian orientation sinful. The movement also openly welcomes gay and lesbian members and supports nondiscrimination policies against gay and lesbian people in civil society.⁷¹

On the other hand, its policies do not support the blessing of gay and lesbian unions, it does not accept openly gay and lesbian seminary students, and it does not condone the ordination of gay or lesbian rabbis.⁷¹

Yet, the movement has officially agreed not to engage in witch-hunts for gay and lesbian rabbis, and no one has been expelled from the Rabbinical Assembly for being gay or lesbian. Moreover, there is no policy to provide for the expulsion of gay or lesbian rabbis, or those who bless gay and lesbian unions.⁷¹

In short, according to Dorff, the Conservative movement appears to be unofficially permitting rabbis to bless gay and lesbian unions — and to come out as gay or lesbian themselves — in order to accumulate more experience and understanding of the issue before forming a comprehensive set of rules that would include disciplinary conditions or clearly approve of these actions.⁷¹

Reform Judaism, the largest Jewish movement, adopts a more broadly accepting position toward gay and lesbian people, in large part because it is based on the principle that religion must reckon with social change to remain meaningful in people's lives. Reform Judaism, for example, does not consider the Leviticus passages quoted above as referring to gay and lesbian relationships as we now know them since such relationships did not exist when the Old Testament was written.^{60, 72}

As a result, Reform Judaism does not consider sexual relations between women or men to be a sin; it openly welcomes gay and lesbian Jews as members; it advocates freedom from employment discrimination for gay and lesbian people in civil society; it supports the right of gay and lesbian couples to be legally married; a lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation is not a bar to admission to the seminary; it ordains gay and lesbian rabbis; and it permits rabbis to bless gay and lesbian couples (although the movement does not officially endorse the blessing of such unions.)⁷²

Reconstructionist Judaism, which holds Judaism to be a human-centered rather than God-centered religious civilization, is fully supportive of gay and lesbian people. In short, it holds the same position as the Reform movement — save that it also officially sanctions the blessing of gay and lesbian unions and considers them the equivalent of heterosexual marriages.⁶⁰

1998 Developments

Summary. Reform Judaism debated the question: Should the movement officially endorse the blessing of gay and lesbian unions? One prominent Jewish spokesman also condemned the religious right for acts of bigotry against gay and lesbian people in the guise of religion.

Debate Over Gay and Lesbian Marriages

The Central Congress of American Rabbis (CCAR), the official arm of Reform Judaism, debated whether to officially endorse the blessing of gay and lesbian unions and honor them as sacred marriages, or *kiddushin*, equal to heterosexual marriages.⁷³

The Responsa Committee (a group of rabbis charged with studying and issuing advisory papers on a variety of issues) argued that they should not because it was important to maintain a clear distinction between gay and lesbian unions and Jewish law's understanding of marriage. But after studying gay and lesbian relationships within the context of the values thought to characterize an ideal Jewish sexual relationship, the Ad Hoc Task Force on Jewish Sexuality concluded that committed gay and lesbian unions reflected these values and thus deserved to be blessed. Moreover, the committee added, “These relationships can serve as the foundation of Jewish families, thus adding strength to the Jewish community.”⁷⁴

As a compromise, the CCAR resolved to consider both arguments as reflecting the range of opinion among members — in effect, allowing rabbis to bless gay and lesbian unions but avoiding an official position that would broaden the breach between their movement and others, according to Rabbi Richard Levy, president of the CCAR. They also agreed to begin an education program and circulate the names of rabbis willing to perform such ceremonies. (More than 500 have signed to date.)⁷³

Condemning the Religious Right's Intolerance

A leader of the Reform movement spoke out against religious political groups' portrayals of gay and lesbian people as sinners who allegedly could be cured through prayer and therapy, saying their message of bigotry “in the guise of religion” must not be allowed to stand as the only religious voice on the issue.⁷⁵

“The Family Research Council is correct when it asserts that the Bible and the Torah ‘present clear and definitive principles,’” said Rabbi Marc Israel, director of congregational relations at the Religious Action Center, the Washington office of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations and Central Conference of American Rabbis. “Among the most important of these,” he said, “is the fundamental Jewish principle that we are all created *b’tselem elohim*, in the divine image. We are all welcome in God’s eyes, whether heterosexual or gay or lesbian. ... We are equal recipients of God’s love.”⁷⁵

But, he added:

“We condemn any and all campaigns by those who, in the name of God and under the guise of religion, preach intolerance, hatred and bigotry. ... We must not allow the religious right to be the only religious voice speaking out on this issue. ... We have a responsibility to combat their efforts to define homosexuality in opposition to true faith and love from God. We stand up and proclaim that there is room in every heart for God, and room in God’s heart for all, regardless of sexual orientation.”⁷⁵

We are all welcome in God's eyes,
whether heterosexual, gay or lesbian.

IX. Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

For more than a century, Presbyterianism was divided over the issue of slavery, with Northerners opposing it and Southerners supporting it. Then about 15 years ago, the merger of the two largest Presbyterian churches into the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) helped bridge that divide. But a similar divide now remains over the church's policies toward gay and lesbian people.⁷⁶

Position on Gay and Lesbian People

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) judges gay and lesbian sexual relations to be a sin and has purported, more generally, that “homosexuality is not God’s wish for humanity.” More specifically, it has asserted: “Even where the homosexual orientation has not been consciously sought or chosen, it is neither a gift from God nor a state nor a condition like race; it is a result of our living in a fallen world.”⁷⁷

On the other hand, the church has been equally clear that it welcomes gay and lesbian members and condemns those who would judge or mistreat them, stating:

“There can be no place within the Christian faith for the response to homosexual persons of mingled contempt, hatred and fear that is called homophobia. ... The church must turn from its fear and hatred to move toward the homosexual community in love and to welcome homosexual inquirers to its congregations. ... Homosexual persons should not be excluded from membership.”⁷⁷

Asserting, moreover, that “sexual conduct in private between consenting adults is a matter of private morality,” the church has opposed laws that would prohibit sexual relations between gay couples. It also has expressed opposition to federal, state and local legislation that discriminates against persons on the basis of sexual orientation, particularly in employment, housing and public accommodations.⁷⁷

More recently, it opposed Colorado’s Amendment 2, which, before being overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1996, would have repealed laws barring discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It also called upon military leaders to end discrimination against gay and lesbian people in the armed forces.⁷⁷

On the more narrow church matter of the blessing of gay and lesbian unions, the Presbyterian Church has taken a more ambiguous position. *The Book of Order*, or Presbyterian church code, for example, states: “It would not be proper for a minister of word and sacrament to perform a same-sex union that the minister determines to be the same as marriage.”⁷⁸

While technically forbidding those ceremonies that a minister considers “the same as [a heterosexual] marriage,” this statement does not prohibit all manner of blessing gay and lesbian unions. Numerous Presbyterian ministers have, consequently, blessed gay and lesbian unions with no disciplinary action taken against them.⁷⁹

The church, finally, forbids the ordination of noncelibate gay and lesbian ministers.

1998 Developments

Summary. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) voted to uphold a policy that requires church leaders to be celibate or heterosexually married. But the vote failed to quell controversy, especially in the Northeast.

Divisive Vote on Gay and Lesbian Church Leaders

Presbyterians rejected a proposed amendment to their constitution that would have marked a first official step in easing a ban against the ordination of noncelibate gay and lesbian ministers, an issue that has divided the church for 20 years.

In its first statement on the issue, the 1978 General Assembly declared:

*“For the church to ordain a self-affirming, practicing homosexual person to ministry would be to act in contradiction to its charter and calling in Scripture, setting in motion both within the church and society serious contradictions to the will of Christ.”*⁷⁸

The only condition upon which a gay or lesbian person could be ordained, the assembly added, was if he or she repented and found “the power of Christ redirecting his or her sexual desires toward a married heterosexual commitment, or finds God’s power to control his or her desires and to adopt a celibate lifestyle.”⁸⁰

While unambiguous, this statement was repeatedly challenged during the 1980s and 1990s. In response, several General Assemblies reaffirmed it. But the controversy continued and, by 1996, some 75 congregations declared that they were willing to ordain noncelibate gay and lesbian ministers.⁸¹

But that same year, the General Assembly sought to issue an amendment to *The Book of Order* to codify the 1978 statement as church law. Entitled “The Fidelity and Chastity Amendment,” (Amendment B), it declared that only those who were heterosexually married, or celibate, could hold leadership positions. Submitted to regional presbyteries for a vote, the amendment was approved — albeit by a narrow margin and along sharp geographical lines.⁸²

Then in 1997, the General Assembly proposed another amendment, known as the “Fidelity and Integrity Amendment,” (Amendment A), in the hope of attracting broader support. Instead of marriage or celibacy, it simply required “fidelity and integrity in marriage or singleness and in all relationships of life.”⁸²

But after submitting Amendment A to a vote, the presbyteries voted in 1998 to reject it, allowing the original ban to stand as church law. The vote again, however, reflected a sharp difference of opinion. Presbyteries in New York, New Jersey, New England and Northern California voted overwhelmingly against the measure, while those in the Southeast, Texas, Southern California and Pennsylvania strongly backed it.⁷⁶

Challenges to Policy Persist

Just months after the vote on the ban on noncelibate gay and lesbian leaders, yet another proposal was submitted to the 1998 General Assembly that called for the withdrawal of any official statement on the matter. But the assembly approved a one-year moratorium on the issue instead, squashing all efforts to put the question up for another vote in 1999.

Other presbyteries, meanwhile showed their disapproval of the ban. In one small gesture, for example, members of the Jan Hus Presbyterian Church in New York nailed pink triangles into a wooden cross during a service as a sign of protest.⁷⁶

More significantly, the Stamford First Presbyterian Church, in Connecticut, nominated a coupled gay man to serve as an elder in what the *Presbyterian Review* described as “a major step toward overt non-compliance” with the ban.⁷⁷

Decision Allows Gay and Lesbian Church Leaders to Remain

In a related matter, the General Assembly’s Permanent Judicial Council voted to allow Ray Whetstone, a coupled gay man who was elected an elder of the Second Presbyterian Church of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in 1996, to maintain his post. Although his election was challenged as violating the prohibition, the high court found that there were no provisions for removing a gay or lesbian church leader who already had been elected or ordained.⁸⁵

X. African Methodist Episcopal Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Church does not appear to have issued any public statements on its attitudes or policies toward gay and lesbian people. But it is expected to discuss the issue at its next General Assembly in 2000, according to Bishop Fred James of South Carolina, a leader of the church for nearly 50 years and a current board member of the Interfaith Alliance.

Before the church will even attempt to formulate a position, however, it will need to agree upon a definition of the terms “gay” and “lesbian,” said James.

“It’s very easy to take some narrow definition and go with that,” the bishop said. Yet, “the reality is there are a whole lot of people who don’t consider themselves in the closet or out of the closet who enjoy going across the lines.”

Cognizant of the gray areas — which James suggested may include those who are curious about gay or lesbian and sex; those who feel same-sex attraction but do not act upon it; and those who are heterosexually married but occasionally have sex with members of the same gender — James said that the church simply needs to better understand what it is talking about when it talks about gay and lesbian people before issuing any pronouncements on the matter.⁸⁶

Conclusion

WHILE THE CONTROVERSY OVER RELIGION AND HOMOSEXUALITY IS ALMOST certain to continue for years to come, one thing now seems clear: Like heterosexuals, most gay and lesbian people have been raised within a tradition of organized religion, and many wish to remain members. Religion can offer solace, community, spiritual and moral development, a sense of meaning and a way to deepen a belief in God.

For countless gay and lesbian people, however, the door to the church, synagogue or mosque remains closed. Most are taught that their expression of love and intimacy — that which many believe makes them most human — is sinful. Some are even taught that what they experience as their natural (perhaps even God-given) orientation is “disordered” or a sign of a fallen world. Most are denied the chance to have a monogamous committed relationship blessed. And many who are called to minister are required to choose between living life alone or ignoring the call.

There is, needless to say, little solace, community or meaning offered in this. Yet gay and lesbian people have not simply turned away but are fighting for their place in the pew, where they can share in the widely felt need for a religious community. A growing number of heterosexuals also have stood up to support them — sometimes at the risk of their own place in the pew or the pulpit. And some institutions have made strides in respecting the spiritual dignity of all people.

As this brief report demonstrates, there remains a long way to go. Religious beliefs change slowly, when they change at all. And gay and lesbian people — by virtue of their relatively recent ability to live in open, committed relationships in this country — present some profound challenges to the Judeo-Christian tradition. But if love, as most profess, is at the heart of that tradition, then there is hope for the eventual, peaceful resolution of this crossfire.

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Appendix One

The Bible and Homosexuality

Those who cite the Bible to condemn gay and lesbian people have long pointed to Genesis, Leviticus and Paul's letters as evidence of God's disapproval. Yet, during the past 30 years, a growing number of biblical scholars, theologians and clergy have suggested that such conclusions are unjustified — or at least more murky than they appear.

They have argued that it is extremely difficult to draw conclusions about gay and lesbian people from the Bible because:

- At the time it was written, there weren't any words for the concepts "gay," "lesbian" or "homosexual;"
- There was no such thing as a committed gay or lesbian couple, as we now know them; and
- There is relatively little said on the subject of same-sex relations, and Jesus said nothing at all on the subject.

Moreover, they question traditional interpretations of these oft-cited passages:

Genesis (1-19) Traditional interpretations cite the creation story as evidence that God intended men and women to come together to propagate the Earth. They also cite the story of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:1-9) as proof that God will destroy those communities that permit homosexual behavior.

Newer interpretations assert that the creation story is not meant to present a paradigm for all human relationships but simply to answer the question, Where do we come from? as the Rev. Peter J. Gomes, preacher and professor of Christian morals at Harvard University, wrote in *The Good Book* (William Morrow, 1996.)

"The creation story is the basis and not the end of human diversity, and thus to regard it as excluding everything it does not mention is to place too great a burden on the text and its writers, and too little responsibility upon the intelligence of the readers, and on the varieties of human experience," Gomes writes.

Scholars of the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, meanwhile, observe that the sin of Sodom is never specifically identified but, rather, deduced from the phrase "to know," which is used 943 times in the Old Testament and, on only 10 occasions, used to refer to sex, according to Gomes.

Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13) Traditional interpretations cite these passages as self-evident condemnation: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination" and "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall be put to death, their blood is upon them."

But Gomes and others have asked: How can people cite such passages as alleged evidence of God's condemnation of homosexuality when they dismiss most of the other rules from Leviticus - such as those calling for the death of children who curse their parents and of adults who commit adultery - as archaic and insupportable?

Paul's Letters (1 Corinthians 6:9-10 and Romans 1:26-27) Traditional interpretations again present the following passage as self-evident of God's condemnation of homosexuality:

“For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. Their women exchanged natural relations for unnatural, and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in their own persons the due penalty for their error.” (Romans 1:26-27)

But more recent interpretations note that this fails to account for the fact that the sexual practices between men that existed 2000 years ago typically took the form of prostitution, not mutual loving relationships. Therefore, these scholars argue, one may not conclude that Paul was condemning something that only came into open existence within our century.

Appendix Two

Religious Groups for Gay and Lesbian Concerns

Roman Catholics

Dignity/USA
1500 Massachusetts Ave., NW, #11
Washington, DC 20005
Phone: (202) 861-0017
Web: <http://www.dignityusa.org>
Executive Director: Charles Cox

New Ways Ministry
4012 29th St.
Mt. Rainier, MD 20712.
Phone: (301) 277-5674
Web: members.aol.com/NewWaysM
Executive Director: Francis DeBernardo

Southern Baptists

Honesty/Texas
<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/2032/whoweare.html>

United Methodists

Reconciling Congregation Program
3801 N. Keeler Ave.
Chicago, IL 60641
Phone: (773) 736-5526
Web: <http://www.rcp.org>
Executive Director: Mark Bowman

Affirmation: United Methodists for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
and Transgender Concerns
P.O. Box 1021
Evanston, IL 60204
Phone: (847) 733-9590
Web: www.umaffirm.org

Lutherans

Lutherans Concerned/North America
2466 Sharondale Drive
Atlanta, Georgia 30305
Phone: (404) 266-9615
Web: <http://www.lcna.org>
Program Executive: Bob Gibeling
Phone: (773) 525-0251

Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministries
152 Church Street
San Francisco, CA 94114-1111
Phone: (415) 553-4026 or (800) 779-7179
Pastoral Contact: Doug Mose
Phone: (773) 525-0251
E-mail: douglas.mose@atkearney.com

Mormons

Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons
National director: Tia Owen
Phone: (702) 765-7041
E-mail: reap@wizard.com
Public relations director: Rick Fernandez
Phone: (503) 288-2037
E-mail: RFHM@pacifier.com
Web: <http://www.teleport.com/~affadmin/>

Jews

World Congress of Gay & Lesbian Jewish Organizations
P.O. Box 23379
Washington, DC 20026-3379
Phone: (202) 452-7424
Web: <http://www.wcgljo.org/wcgljo>

Presbyterians

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