



Gay and Lesbian Churches and Synagogues

by Jeffery P. Dennis

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Gay and lesbian persons have always been full participants in the practices of Christianity, Judaism, and other religions, but usually their participation has been conditional on hiding their sexuality. During the gay liberation movement of the late 1960s, however, a number of separate groups were formed to address the needs of gay and lesbian believers.

Within the mainstream Christian denominations, organizations formed such as Dignity, for Roman Catholics (1969); Integrity, for Episcopalians (1974); Lutherans Concerned (1974); Affirmation, for United Methodists (1975); the Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian/Gay Concerns (1976); and many others. With few exceptions these were (and remain) counseling, support, or social groups that work for recognition and full membership rights of glbtq people within the denominations.

However, many Christian denominations and the Orthodox and Conservative branches of Judaism look askance at same-sex sexual relationships and frequently refuse membership to openly gay and lesbian persons. Other denominations may have official policies of accepting or welcoming gay and lesbian members, but are nevertheless extremely heterosexist in their daily worship practices, promoting heterosexual relationships as normal, natural, and universal. In these denominations, gay and lesbian persons often feel marginalized and rejected in spite of their official "welcome."

In reaction to this condemnation and marginalization, glbtq people have created a number of gay- and lesbian-specific churches and synagogues, just as racial minorities have organized their own denominations to evade the overt or subtle racism of mainstream congregations.

Pre-Stonewall Gay and Lesbian Churches

Perhaps the first church established for homosexuals was the Liberal Catholic Church, founded in Sydney, Australia by Charles Webster Leadbeater in 1916. An ex-Anglican clergyman who had been an associate of Annie Besant in the Theosophical Society, Leadbeater immigrated to Australia after he had been accused of indecencies with young boys.

In 1946, Archbishop George Hyde of the Eucharistic Catholic Communion (a small denomination not in union with the Roman Catholic Church) celebrated mass for gay men in Atlanta. In 1956, the Church of ONE Brotherhood was founded in Los Angeles by homophile activist Chuck Rowland. In 1959, ministers at the Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco were instrumental in forming the Council on Religion and the Homosexual, which worked to end police harassment of gay men and lesbians. In 1962, a Congregationalist pastor began an overt pastoral ministry to gay people in New York City.

These initiatives, however, were either small congregations that attracted little attention or the outreach efforts of large denominations or activist churches. The first gay-specific denomination, as opposed to individual congregation, was the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches, founded in



With 3,862 members in 2008, the Cathedral of Hope in Dallas, Texas, a member congregation of the United Church of Christ, describes itself as the largest liberal church with a primary outreach to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender persons. Photograph by Wayne Wolfe.
Image courtesy Cathedral of Hope.

1968 by the Reverend Troy Perry.

Metropolitan Community Churches

From its modest beginnings in the living room of its founder, the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches has grown greatly. The MCC has 40,000 members in hundreds of churches worldwide. But its impact has been far greater than its numbers: hundreds of thousands of gay and lesbian persons have passed through the doors of a local MCC to hear the message that God loves glbtq people and to overcome feelings of guilt instilled by their childhood churches. Politically active in support of glbtq rights and in promoting same-sex marriage, the MCC is an important institution in the glbtq community.

MCC's liturgy tends to be ecumenical, but its doctrine is evangelical and, on some issues, fundamentalist, in keeping with the Reverend Perry's Pentecostal roots and the evangelical heritage of most members.

Defining a Gay-Oriented Church

Often it is difficult to determine if a congregation is merely non-discriminatory or specifically oriented toward gay and lesbian persons. Some local congregations, especially those designated as "Welcoming churches" in the Baptist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, United Church of Christ, Methodist, Episcopal, and Brethren/Mennonite denominations, may consist of a majority of gay and lesbian members. For example, almost all of the members of the West Hollywood Presbyterian Church are gay, though it is officially merely a "More Light" congregation that extends a "welcome" to gay and lesbian members among others. Conversely, a gay-oriented congregation always welcomes heterosexual families, friends, and other interested parties. In some cities, 25-30% of MCC congregants are heterosexual.

Although particular congregations of mainstream denominations may be welcoming of glbtq people, most of these denominations limit the participation of openly gay or lesbian people, often refusing to ordain non-celibate gays or lesbians as members of the clergy, and sometimes even as deacons.

Mainstream Protestant Denominations

There seem to be few gay-specific churches with doctrine or practices rooted in the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, United Church of Christ, Disciples of Christ, Unitarian Universalist, Society of Friends, or other mainstream Protestant denominations. Although some of these churches are more conservative than others and many have been rent by controversies over the ordination of gay and lesbian clergy and the blessing of same-sex marriage or commitment ceremonies, they tend not to reject openly gay and lesbian congregants, and most have made an effort to welcome glbtq people. Hence, they have not generally given rise to gay-specific churches.

Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants, on the other hand, do not have the option of welcoming congregations, and their distinctive liturgical practices are often not sufficiently reflected in MCC services. Therefore, they are likely to organize their own gay-specific denominations or independent churches.

Independent Catholic Churches

The Roman Catholic Church has adopted an officially anti-gay stance, but Independent Catholic Churches, deviating from Rome in their failure to recognize Papal authority, often have an outreach to gay and lesbian communicants. Among these are the American Catholic Church, the American Ecumenical Church, the Apostolic Catholic Church, and others. Some of these outreach programs can be identified as gay-specific only through euphemism. The Free Catholic Church, for instance, notes that "We welcome you, whoever you are, whatever you are, and wherever you are." Potential congregants are expected to deduce "gay" from the list of possible whoevers and whatevers.

The Holy Spirit Ecumenical Catholic Church similarly notes a failure to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation at the end of a wide variety of reforms not specific to gay people (for instance, allowing women to serve as priests and allowing divorced persons to take Communion). But then it states that it is a church "for gay and lesbian persons, their families and friends."

Evangelical Protestant Churches

Dozens or perhaps hundreds of gay-specific congregations in the United States, Canada, Britain, and Latin America have emerged from evangelical Protestant roots, especially the Holiness-Wesleyan and Pentecostal families. Most are organized into one or more of several gay evangelical associations.

The Evangelical Network includes many Holiness-Wesleyan-style congregations, including the Casa De Cristo (Phoenix, Ariz.), the Celebration of Faith Praise and Worship Center (San Jose, Calif.), and The New Creation Christian Fellowship (St. Louis, Mo.). The Alliance of Christian Churches includes many nondenominational fundamentalist groups such as the Open Door Community Church (Little Rock, Ark.), the Abundant Life Community Church (Panama City, Fla.), and Church of the Holy Spirit (Quincy, Ill.). The Fellowship of Reconciling Pentecostals International includes such local bodies as the Potter's House Fellowship (Tampa, Fla.), The New Life Community Church of Hope (Laporte, Ind.), and the Reconciling Pentecostal Assembly (Scottsdale, Ariz.). There are also many unaffiliated congregations, such as the Glory to God Community Church (Ogden, Ut.) and the World Harvesters Church (New Orleans, La.).

Like mainstream evangelicals, gay and lesbian evangelicals enjoy a vast network of connections beyond the local congregation, including evangelistic ministries, music ministries, and interchurch "crusades." Among the largest of these that reach out to gay men and lesbians are Eighth Day Ministries (Nashville, Tenn.), Logos Ministries (Dallas, Tex.), and SpiritSong Ministries (Deerfield Beach, Fla.). There is also a seminary for gay and lesbian evangelicals, the Christ Evangelical Bible Institute of Tempe, Arizona.

The gay-specific focus of the evangelical churches is often somewhat subtle. Though Anchored in Christ Ministries specifies that its goal is "to raise up strong mighty people for the ministry including the gay, bisexual, transgender and heterosexual community of Columbus, Georgia and Phenix City, Alabama," the New Creation Christian Fellowship merely includes "sexual orientation" as one of many social categories that God does not discriminate against, while Potter's House Fellowship does not mention gay or lesbian people at all on its website.

However, the evangelical churches are not at all subtle about their Christian beliefs. Often they are unabashedly fundamentalist, perhaps attempting to attract persons disappointed by the more liberal, inclusive focus of the MCC. The New Life Community Church, for instance, states that the Bible is the "inspired, infallible Word of God" and insists that "Jesus is the only way to salvation."

African-American Churches

Most gay-specific churches actively promote diversity, but nevertheless tend to draw upon the experiences of the same white, middle-class men and women likely to have positions of power in mainstream churches. In response, the Reverend Carl Bean founded the Unity Fellowship Churches in 1982. Drawing upon the rhetoric of liberation theology and promoting a distinctively African-American form of worship, the Unity Fellowship teaches "freedom on all levels of racial, sexual, religious, and social-economic oppression."

Headquartered in Los Angeles, the Unity Fellowship currently consists of fifteen churches across the United States, mostly in inner-city neighborhoods in large cities.

Gay Synagogues

The first gay-specific synagogue, Beth Chaim Chadashim, was founded in Los Angeles in 1972, and is still

active, with hundreds of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual members. Since the Union for Reform Judaism (formerly the Union of American Hebrew Congregations) offers both full membership and the rabbinate to gay and lesbian congregants, few gay-specific synagogues have been organized. The World Congress of GLBT Jews is comprised of 65 organizations in the United States, Europe, Latin America, and Israel, for instance, but most are social, support, and political organizations, not *shuls* dedicated to prayer and worship.

There are about thirty gay-specific synagogues in North America. Among the best known of these congregations are New York City's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah (founded in 1973), South Florida's Congregation Etz Chaim (1974), Philadelphia's Congregation Beth Ahavah (1975), Chicago's Congregation Or Chadash (1976), San Francisco's Congregation Sha'ar Zahav (1977), and Toronto's Congregation Keshet Shalom (1978).

The gay-specific synagogues differ in significant ways from both their mainstream Jewish counterparts and from gay Christian denominations.

Since openly gay and lesbian people are generally not welcome in Conservative and Orthodox congregations but are generally welcomed in Reform and Reconstructionist ones, the gay-specific synagogues often tend toward Orthodoxy in liturgy and practices, even though they are politically affiliated with the Reform or Reconstructionist movements. For instance, they are likely to use Hebrew prayers exclusively instead of mixing Hebrew and English, and to use "g_d" to avoid defaming the name of the Lord, a practice rare among Reform and Reconstructionist Jews.

Gay-specific synagogues are considerably more likely than gay-specific churches to espouse their identity aggressively, instead of depending on euphemism and "reading between the lines." Bet Mispachah (Washington, D. C.), for instance, says: "we are a congregation for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Jews and all who wish to participate in an inclusive, egalitarian, and mutually supportive community." Beth Rachamin (Philadelphia) advertises itself as "A gay voice in the Jewish community, a Jewish voice in the gay community."

This difference between the openness of the gay-specific synagogues and the euphemism of the gay-specific churches may relate to the likelihood of homophobic retaliation by non-gay members of the faith communities. Mainstream Reform Jews who stumble upon a gay-specific synagogue are unlikely to respond negatively; but mainstream evangelical Christians, fed on a constant diet of homophobic rhetoric, may well respond with hostility.

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