

Can Christians Be Gay?

In today's social climate there is growing acceptance of homosexuality—even in segments of the church. How does the Holy Spirit want us to respond to the growing “gay Christian” movement?

On a cool spring morning in midtown Orlando, Florida, dozens of motorists clamor for parking spaces on a grassy field. Men and women, trying to make the church service on time, grab their Bibles and rush toward a quaint, wooden building. Children on their way to Sunday school wave at their friends while running on the tree-lined sidewalks.

After receiving a warm greeting by ushers, church members hurriedly find their seats. Almost 200 people pack the small sanctuary. By the end of the day, more than 400 will have attended one of the church's three Sunday services.

Pastor Carol Trissell offers a friendly welcome to visitors, and the service begins. The style is a unique blend of liturgical form and evangelical tradition with charismatic overtones. And though the morning services are somewhat staid, the evening gathering boasts a modern praise band with charismatic-style worship.

Following several choruses and Scripture readings, Trissell takes center stage to deliver her sermon. With a sense of humor and a style true to her Southern Baptist roots, the 43-year-old minister preaches a message similar to those heard in thousands of churches across the country every Sunday morning.

In it, she warns about the danger of rejecting God's Word. She

underscores the importance of listening to those who have spiritual discernment. She cautions against compartmentalizing our hearts and letting God control only certain areas.

Then the congregants approach the altar to receive prayer and to celebrate communion. The meeting concludes with a hymn. It appears to have been much like any other worship service attended throughout the city.

Except for one profound distinction: The people gathered here at Joy Metropolitan Community Church, for the most part, are openly gay.

They say they have reconciled their faith with their homosexuality. They insist that passages in the Bible condemning homosexual behavior either don't apply today or have been misinterpreted. They tell gay men and lesbians who visit their church that God doesn't have a problem with their sexual behavior.

Charisma recently interviewed principal leaders in the so-called "gay Christian" movement as well as key directors of Christian ministries who strive to help those seeking freedom from homosexuality. We found that homosexuality is a complex issue that demands both spiritual discernment and compassion toward those who grapple with it in their own lives. It also requires the church to take a hard look at some tough realities.

Out of the Closet

Trissell's congregation is one of more than 300 Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches (UFMCC) that

meet in 18 countries worldwide. The gay denomination—founded by defrocked Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee) minister Troy Perry in 1968 and boasting a membership of more than 32,000—is the largest of the gay church networks, all of which are small compared to traditional mainline, evangelical or Pentecostal-charismatic denominations. Statistics are not even available for most gay churches outside the UFMCC.

But despite comparatively modest figures, the growth of the gay church movement has been consistent—and it has not been limited to the more liturgical style of the UFMCC. Gay charismatic churches have also sprung up, including those in the National Gay Pentecostal Alliance (NGPA) founded in 1980—which has small churches operating in nine states—and independent works such as Potter's House Fellowship in Tampa, Florida, founded in 1998 by Robert Morgan, a gay pastor with roots in the Assemblies of God (AG) and United Pentecostal Church (UPC).

Homosexuality is not an issue confined to gay churches, however. Presbyterians, Episcopalians and even Southern Baptists, to name a few, have battled over it in their board rooms for years. The conflict is only heating up.

A proposal to ban same-sex commitment ceremonies in the Presbyterian Church . (PCUSA) was defeated in a vote of 87 to 63 by regional presbyteries last March. That same month, St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Denver elected an openly gay man as their pastor. And attempts to oust from the Southern Baptist Convention's Atlanta Baptist Association two churches known for affirming homosexuality failed in a vote at the association's 93rd annual meeting in March, although both congregations could face disciplinary action.

Even Christian universities have not been immune. Gay alumni who had kept their homosexuality a secret while attending Oral Roberts University (ORU) in Tulsa, Oklahoma, staged a “coming out” at the college during homecoming celebrations in February. Though the university does not recognize the group, called ORU-OUT, as an official school organization, ORU spokesman David Wagner told reporters that members of the pro-gay group were welcome on campus for homecoming and that “we are not wanting to prejudge anyone,” though he was careful to note homosexuality is not condoned by the school.

Changing views within the church undoubtedly reflect changing views in society at large. When Americans were asked in a February 1999 Gallup Poll if they felt homosexuality should be considered an acceptable lifestyle or not, exactly 50 percent said yes—up from 34 percent who answered yes to the same question in 1982. These statistics are consistent with a 1997 poll by the Barna Research Group (BRG), which reported that 46 percent of people who had an opinion on the subject stated that “Christian churches should accept gay people as church leaders.”

The denominational disputes ensuing from such controversial views are, of course, immaterial in openly gay-affirming churches because even though many of them do adhere to the basics of traditional evangelical doctrine—such as original sin, salvation and the Holy Spirit—they have redefined certain biblical passages to teach that homosexuality is acceptable to God (see related story on page 42).

Gay churches are a relatively new phenomenon, too—none existed 35 years ago. Until the 1950s, there was no visible secular gay rights movement either, according to Joe Dallas, director of Genesis Counseling in Orange, California, and author of the book *A Strong Delusion* (Harvest House), which serves as a

guide to understanding pro-gay theology and responding to it with both biblical truth and mercy for those caught in homosexuality.

Dallas, now 46, was part of a UFMCC church from 1978 until he left the gay community in 1984. "If someone as deluded as I was can be brought out of homosexuality," he writes, "then surely anyone can." The process of finding freedom from homosexuality, however, and the church's response to people who struggle are almost as controversial as the issue itself.

Is Freedom Possible?

Jeremy Marks illustrates the complexities of the debate between pro-gay groups and what is called the "ex-gay" movement, which includes Christian organizations such as Exodus International, the world's leading referral network that helps people find freedom from homosexuality. The director of Courage—a group he founded in the United Kingdom in 1988 that was formerly associated with Exodus—Marks, 48, pulled out of the ex-gay network in March, claiming that "conversion therapy" does not work. Married since 1991, he now says that therapeutic methods such as those used by Exodus to help people overcome homosexuality change only outward behavior and that none of the people he observed in his ministry achieved long-term success in becoming sexually re-oriented.

"It can actually make things worse," he asserts, describing people he knows who became disillusioned and eventually lost their faith when therapy failed. But though Marks claims his view is not as extreme as the pro-gay groups who celebrate their homosexuality, it is still a radical departure from what he used

to believe.

“In the past, I would not have thought you could have a gay relationship and still be right with God,” he says. “I’m not sure I agree with that any more. I don’t think it’s a right judgment to say that everything about homosexuality is sinful. I think it’s more like a disability—like someone who is dyslexic.”

Most Christian leaders disagree with his conclusions.

“I believe sexual orientation is a learned behavior and can be unlearned,” says Grahame Hazell, president of Exodus in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. “Is it easy? No. Will it always be a struggle? Usually, yes. We will always be drawn to our roots and will never be perfect this side of the cross. But God’s Word says that if we align our will with His, we will make progress.”

Pro-gay groups, however, contend that “progress” is not enough. When John Paulk—manager of Focus on the Family’s Homosexuality and Gender

Department for Public Policy and one of the ex-gay movement’s most visible spokespersons—was spotted visiting a gay bar in Washington, D.C., last September, the gay community heralded the incident as proof of ex-gay ministry failure. Paulk, 38, was removed as board chairman of Exodus but has since been reinstated as an active board member and is still with Focus, having completed a restoration process that included counseling with a Christian therapist.

The pressure of being in the media spotlight for the last nine years—becoming a sort of “poster boy” for ex-gay ministry

success—as well as his lack of monitoring personal stress played into the incident, says Paulk, who from the age of 18 was involved in radical elements of the homosexual community until he received Christ in 1987.

“My curiosity got the best of me,” Paulk told Charisma in an exclusive interview, being careful not to make excuses for what he admits was bad judgment and to stress that he was not seeking a sexual encounter. “Part of my background was the community aspect [of the gay bar scene]. So basically I was sitting on a barstool the entire time, talking to another married man.

“Being in there reminded me that this is not what I want,” continues Paulk, who has been happily married since 1992. “It was as empty as when I had left it. God has used it for good, to reinforce that I’m different.”

And that, says Bob Davies, executive director of Exodus North America, is the message of Exodus: The power of Christ can make a difference and bring freedom to those who struggle with homosexuality. “We don’t claim we’re perfect here. The past is always going to be in the background. There are occasional struggles, but they don’t rule my life. If I didn’t have this struggle, I’d have some other struggle.

“It’s an ongoing choice to surrender to the call of Christ,” he continues. “In that regard, we are no different from any other Christian.”

Challenge to the Church

The church, however, traditionally has treated those who

struggle with homosexuality differently than it does those who deal with issues that are more easily understood. Some Christian leaders believe the church often does more harm than good because of its aversion to dealing with issues that make people uncomfortable.

“Except for one person, I hadn’t found anyone who was willing to talk about this issue in a nice way,” recalls Alan Chambers, speaking of his own struggle with homosexuality in his late teens. Today Chambers, 29, is the director of Exchange Ministries, a counseling ministry based in Orlando, Florida, that mostly focuses on helping teen-agers find freedom from homosexuality.

“The church [at large] is responsible for the gay church,” Chambers says. “The church wasn’t willing to do its job. Here are a group of people who want to love God, who probably tried to do it in our own churches, but we pushed them away. They probably, at first, wanted to change, but well-meaning Christians rejected them. So they fled to somewhere that accepted them.”

Many gay leaders would agree with Chambers’ assessment. In fact, most of the gay people Charisma interviewed sought help for dealing with their homosexual feelings from the church first—and found the help to be either inadequate or completely nonexistent.

When Troy Perry, founder of UFMCC, was a teen struggling to come to terms with his homosexual desires, he tried to get help from his Church of God pastor. He was given shockingly simplistic advice.

"He told me, 'All you need to do is marry a good woman, and that'll take care of the problem,'" says Perry, now 61. "It wasn't as funny or flippant five years later when we went through a painful divorce."

Thankfully, the church has improved somewhat in recent years, according to David Kyle Foster, a former homosexual who is now a charismatic Episcopal priest and the director of Jacksonville, Florida-based Mastering Life Ministries.

"There has been a wonderful turnaround in the last 10 years," Foster says. "I would say a third of churches are pursuing this type of ministry vigorously without the old prejudices and fears. Another third know it's the right thing, but don't know what to do. But another third are still running from it."

Many run because of the complexity involved, especially when it comes to understanding the cause of homosexuality. Theories are abundant even in the Christian community and range from the scientific to the spiritual. Some say it is behavioral; others believe it is psychological or developmental; others teach that it is a generational curse or that its roots are demonic.

Scientific studies are plentiful as well, though many of them have been proved to be highly flawed or have not been replicated, thus making them inconclusive at best. Still, even some ex-gay ministry leaders leave room for the possibility that there may be a biological influence, or predisposition, involved with homosexuality. But they assert that would not change the moral question involved.

And that is the crux of the dilemma regarding gay churches,

according to Christian leaders: Gays have tried to change the moral question involved by reinterpreting the Bible.

“They have moved the ancient boundary stones of truth,” says Andy Comiskey, director of Desert Stream Ministries in Anaheim, California. “The Scripture is clear that those who do that are in trouble. I’m sure there are sincere Christians among them, but they are deceived.”

Of course gay leaders do not see it that way. Mel White, dean of UFMCC’s Cathedral of Hope in Dallas—the largest gay church in the world—believes homosexuality is simply a variation of God’s creation. He says he came to that conclusion after 35 years of unsuccessful attempts—which included electroshock therapy and seeking healing at a Kathryn Kuhlman crusade—to overcome his homosexual feelings.

“Homosexuals, like heterosexuals, shouldn’t repent of their orientation, but of their sinful responses to their orientation,” says White, who at one time was one of Christian publishing’s most prolific ghostwriters, having written for leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Billy Graham and Jim and Tammy Bakker.

Most Christian leaders, however, believe such conclusions put one’s faith at risk.

“It’s eternal destiny that I’m concerned about,” says Shelly Morgan, an Assemblies of God minister whose 40-year-old son, Robert, pastors a gay church in Tampa. “The Word is plain: When you engage in this type of immorality, heterosexual or homosexual, you are headed toward an eternity without God.”

Robert Morgan believes his father, Shelly, is wrong and that the Bible condones gay relationships. Conservative Christians may dismiss his beliefs out of hand—but they would do well to consider one point he makes.

“I wish the church were safer,” he says. “The church should be a city of refuge. Instead, it’s a dangerous place to be honest about issues.

“The church today is being confronted with issues we’ve never been confronted with before. Simplistic approaches are not going to work. They will only hurt people.”

Perhaps his comments point the way to how the church could better handle this issue: By becoming a city of refuge for people who are tormented; creating an environment where people feel safe to open up when they are struggling; understanding the complexity of the issue and realizing that trite answers don’t work; and learning to see people who are caught in homosexuality’s trap the way Jesus does.

This type of approach is what helped Sandy Martin and Debbie Hawes—two former lesbians who once were part of Joy Metropolitan Community Church—find freedom. Becoming disillusioned with the gay denomination and hungry for more of God, Martin and Hawes ended up attending an Assemblies of God church.

They say it was in an environment of solid biblical teaching infused with a spirit of love and full of examples they could observe of true Christlike living that the Holy Spirit called them to holiness and gave them the willingness to come out of homosexuality. And they offer good insight for those who still

struggle.

“Just because you are suffering, that doesn’t give you an out,” Martin says. “But the pain does have a place to go: the cross.”

In that way, people who deal with homosexuality are no different from anyone else.

“God is not asking only homosexuals to change,” Hawes says. “All of us are called to let Christ take our pain and make us free in Him. The same God who parted the Red Sea is able to change anything He wants to in me.”