

Clash in the Party Zone

As Key West's gay population grows, churches there are struggling to know how to respond.

They flock to Key West from all over the world to paint the town pink. The country's southernmost city is celebrated as a gay Mecca where, as one international travel promoter puts it, "The closets have no doors."

Homosexual holiday-makers can stay at exclusively gay and lesbian hotels and guesthouses, play gay bingo, take the gay-history tram tour, and follow the special gay and lesbian map of the city with directions to the Leather Master ("A Toy Shop for the Adventurous").

If that's not enough, they can visit the offices of the Gay and Lesbian Visitor Info Center, nestled across the street from Ernest Hemingway's old house, for a list of other gay-friendly attractions such as the Aqua nightclub ("Where the prettiest girls just happen to be boys!").

The gay scene is more vibrant—and visible—on this tiny end-of-the-road, Caribbean-flavored island at the bottom of the map (population around 24,000) than in most major cities in the rest of the United States. But visitors learn there are some surprising omissions from the roster.

"What you won't find here that you do in other metropolitan areas are specially gay organizations—gay men's choruses and softball teams," says Scott Fraser, executive director at the gay center.

That's because an estimated one in four Key West residents are

gay or
lesbian. The “alternative” has been mainstreamed.

“We’re assimilated so well, if you want to sing in the local choir, all they will ask is how well do you sing,” Fraser explains. “And if you want to bring your partner, all they will ask is how well can they sing, too.”

He fields phone calls from around the country from people dealing with gay-related issues who “don’t know what to do, and they think of Key West. It never ceases to amaze me ... how we have become a focal point for people across the nation.”

Mandy Bolen, who covers gay issues for the local Citizen newspaper, observes: “A lot of people look to Key West to see how a small town really deals with some polarizing and divisive issues, and Key West really does it immensely well.”

Sitting in front of three flags bearing the city, state and gay-pride rainbow colors, Mayor Jimmy Weekley agrees that the city has a reputation for pioneering gay-related issues. The city has viewed it as a human rights issue. “And I’m proud of that fact,” he says.

Mat Staver, director of Liberty Counsel, a Christian legal firm specializing in religious persecution and traditional values cases, also sees Key West as one of the most “homosexual-friendly” cities in the country, but he’s less positive about the profile.

“Everyone ought to be having a good look at Key West,” he says, “and see whether that is something they want the country to be modeled after—a city that has thrown off restraint in

human sexuality.”

The lack of restraint is most evident late each October, when Key West hosts Fantasy Fest, a Mardi Gras-style celebration that may draw less of a crowd than New Orleans but features much more exposed skin.

But it’s also apparent the rest of the year, with open displays of affection among the estimated 500,000-plus annual gay and lesbian tourists, some of whom step ashore from the gay-only cruises that call at port. Former TV talk-show host Rosie O’Donnell came here last year and received a civic reception when her gay family cruise visited.

Saving Conch Souls

Indeed if anyone’s in the closet here it’s many conservative Christians, who, in the face of muscular championing of “tolerance” and “diversity,” choose to keep their heads down and their views about the Bible to themselves. Staver found churches reluctant to “take an open stand,” he says, when he was looking for local believers willing to be named in an action challenging same-sex marriage in Florida last year.

“We did get turned down by some,” he says. “People don’t want reprisals. Some said they agreed with our case but didn’t want to go out publicly.”

When Christians draw a line, they can quickly find themselves at the center of controversy. Salvation Army Capt. Bob Reckline drew heat in the local media recently when he stopped the group’s thrift stores from handing out bumper stickers proclaiming the pro-diversity message “One Human Family,”

adopted as the city's official motto.

"I just didn't want to put something in my stores I didn't agree with," he says. "I don't condemn those who practice an alternative lifestyle—that's not my call to do. I believe in what Jesus teaches, to love everybody, and The Salvation Army has always helped, regardless of someone's lifestyle."

In other places people who disagree strongly on issues can choose to just ignore one another, but that's not as easy on what is commonly referred to as a "2-by-4" island. Working out how to be a good neighbor while holding firm to biblical values vexes Ernie DeLoach, probably the most high-profile minister in Key West.

A third generation "Conch" who spent 25 years on the mission field before returning to pastor the Assemblies of God church in which he was saved as a youngster, the perpetually cheery 63-year-old who peppers his conversation with "It's all about souls" oversees a range of welfare programs that include letting the homeless use the church's address so they can get mail.

"We are going to have to love them into the kingdom," he says about reaching gays. "I don't believe we have to compromise our message, but we have to let them see that there is a deep concern in our heart for them.

"A lot of times people want to lambaste them, but they will never win them to Jesus if they keep doing that," he notes. "And telling them they are going to hell if they don't change—that approach won't work today, especially in Key West. I tell my people we are going to love them into the kingdom."

Unofficially viewed by many as the island's pastor, DeLoach has performed funerals for gays who have died, though he has declined to perform same-sex wedding ceremonies when asked to. He is spoken of affectionately by Steven Torrence, a Key West police officer who for 15 years pastored the town's main gay congregation, the Metropolitan Community Church.

"He's one of the few pastors in Key West that is truly living out the gospel mandates," Torrence comments. "He's not homophobic. I personally believe that everybody has a right to believe what they want, whether I believe it or not. That's a fundamental right, and if they disagree that doesn't make them homophobic."

Not everyone in the gay community is as accepting. DeLoach knows that some watch his every step, even tuning in to his morning radio broadcast to monitor what he says. A few years ago he received death threats before taking part in the island's annual Christmas parade.

Local evangelical churches had organized the event for years until they declined an application from Torrence's congregation to take part because of his church's gay leanings. The city commissioners took offense at the snubbing and squeezed the churches out by canceling the usual fees waiver and organizing their own alternative event.

DeLoach sees the incident as illustrative of the need to be wise about where to take a stand. "It's not about compromising, but we have to live with these people," he says. "A lot of times as Christians we want to jump on the homosexual situation, but what about gossip, what about hatred, what about prejudice and greed? Sin is sin in God's sight."

That is Charles Owens' approach at Key West's Fifth Street Baptist Church, too. He doesn't focus on homosexuality, but he doesn't avoid the issue, either.

"I'm not on any bandwagon or crusade, I'm just called to preach the Bible, to teach it, and I'm not going to back away from it," he says. "I'm a fundamentalist, but we're not mad about things. We are not angry people. We just know that the Bible views sin as a thing that ... can't be tampered with or adapted."

Not everyone appreciates the pastor's directness. Owens recalls some people leaving the church after one sermon, though he does not know for sure that the departure related to his comments on homosexuality. For the most part, though, such viewpoints are simply ignored.

"We don't pay them much attention," admits Fraser, at the gay center. "We kind of live and let live. We are just not interested." He explains that gays are not interested in refuting those kinds of comments "when you know they land on deaf ears anyway."

Such indifference is in some ways more alarming to conservatives than militancy. Especially when it signals, as it does in Key West at least, that the gay-rights clash is over and the victors' flag is rainbow-hued—like the one unfurled in 2003 along the town's main street from the Atlantic at one end to the Gulf of Mexico at the other to celebrate "Sea to Sea Diversity."

Although tiny Key West may set some of the pace for gay issues

and highlights the challenges facing Bible-believing Christians in a pro-homosexual culture, observers are not persuaded that it necessarily points to the future for the rest of the country.

“It’s a nation unto itself,” comments Alan Chambers, executive director of Exodus, the ministry-to-gays network of the island. The November election results last year—which saw all 11 same-sex marriage initiatives rejected—showed the rest of the country “going more conservative,” he says.

“The mushy middle is waking up and realizing if they don’t do something very quickly, things will go by the wayside.”

A Port in the Cultural Storm

Key West’s emergence as a gay hotspot is due to a mixture of culture and commerce. Separated from the mainland by 42 bridges and geographically closer to Havana than Miami, it has always enjoyed a reputation as a place of refuge for those looking to escape the rest of America, drawing the drifters and dreamers, rebels and refugees.

Its early income came from the cargo of ships that floundered on the surrounding rocks, some lured by faux lighthouse beacons. DeLoach’s youth pastor, Kent Fischer, observes that the contemporary bright lights of Key West continue to attract many who “shipwreck their souls.” DeLoach adds: “The pirates have just changed their costumes.”

Locals know that the city’s 1982 declaration of independence from the United States as the Conch Republic—triggered by the effect that a drug-smuggling clampdown was having on tourism

in the area—was as much a reflection of its true spirit as a marketing gimmick.

Key West's laid-back personality has always drawn gays, some of whom in the 1970s began to promote the place among their own as a tourism spot. The boost to the economy gave them a voice, and in 1983 art gallery owner Richard Heyman became the first openly gay mayor to be elected in the nation. He served two terms, dying of AIDS in 1994.

The city has continued to pioneer gay issues, establishing the country's only city-sponsored AIDS memorial. Commissioners have also led the way in enshrining gay rights, last year adding the "transgendered" to the protected list and passing a resolution supporting gay marriage.

The city also has a budget specifically for promoting gay tourism, with a board member of the International Gay and Lesbian Tourist Association based in the town. An ad in Travel + Leisure magazine depicts two men snuggled on a Key West veranda and the invitation to "join our 'One Human Family' where our hearts and minds are always open and everyone is welcome."

Some gays who call Key West home are, however, ambivalent about its celebrated status and distance themselves from the in-your-face attitude of events such as Fantasy Fest.

"Here a person's sexual orientation is no more an issue than whether they are left- or right-handed," comments Wayne Smith, an attorney who has lived here with his partner, Daniel Skahen, for 12 years. "I think that's the way it should be."

He sees a deep mutual respect shared between people who disagree on gay issues, noting some of his clients might not back his and Skahen's legal battle for gay adoption rights but that it doesn't interfere with his ability to handle their real estate transactions.

The two men were part of a suit challenging Florida law that prohibits gays from adopting. The U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case in January. The pair has fostered more than a dozen abused and neglected children over the years and believes the ban on adoption is more "a children's rights issue than a gay rights issue."

If they'd just wanted children of their own, Smith insists, they could have done so without difficulty—through private adoption or surrogacy. "But we wanted to make a difference in the lives of children that nobody else wanted," he explains. "We are simply asking for the opportunity to be considered as everyone else is, on a case-by-case basis."

The kind of tolerance he is talking about isn't always a two-way street. Key West's reputation for being accepting took a bit of a hit last year when three heterosexual couples were turned out of a gay-run guesthouse even though they had knowingly made reservations there with gay friends.

Fischer says it's tough for youngsters growing up in an aggressively pro-gay atmosphere, citing the "lesbian chic" embraced by peers of his youth group members. Constant exposure to the gay scene means youngsters' innocence is "ripped away at an early age," he says.

Sometimes the deck seems stacked against Christians wanting to

raise families according to biblical values, Owens echoes.

“There’s so much that favors the other side of the issue, the extremely tolerant, to where it seems no one wants to leave much room for the biblical side of the issues,” he says. “There’s a lot of bias against any voice that would question so-called tolerance towards alternative lifestyles and that sort of thing.”

“It’s like the Old Testament,” DeLoach says. “Every person did what was right in their own eyes—that expresses the philosophy of Key West. Christians who take any kind of stand are accused of being intolerant.”

The Gospel of “Bible Bill”

Bill Welzien has preached to crowds in Key West for almost 20 years.

On Key West’s Mallory Square, evangelist Bill Welzien scribbles on a drawing board to make a point about man’s need for God. His “church” is outside—and his congregants are more likely to be sinners than saints.

A one-time hippie, Welzien has for almost 20 years taken his place among Key West’s open-air entertainers. He stakes out his preaching spot among artisans, jugglers, escape artists and tarot card readers.

He uses an easel and a fill-in-the-blanks word-puzzle to draw a crowd and deliver a short, waterfront sermon leavened with a little humor. He talks about sin but leaves discussion of

homosexuality for one-on-one conversations.

“The Bible is very clear that sexual activity is blessed in holy matrimony, but it’s defined as being between a man and a woman, and any other sexual activity is considered to be sinful,” he says.

“I don’t want to be hateful. I just want to give a biblical perspective. I want to deal with ideas and challenge people to think,” he adds.

“The word ‘tolerance’ has come to mean something different to its original meaning. I’m tolerant of other people.”

Away from the pier, as pastor of a small Presbyterian church, Welzien has taken a public stand on issues, writing to the local newspaper and addressing city meetings. Last year he also agreed to be named in a Liberty Counsel legal action challenging same-sex moves.

Welzien separates gays from the gay agenda. “There’s a difference between a movement that wants to overturn society and an individual who is a potential believer in the Lord Jesus,” he says.

He has drawn criticism in print but is accepted among the Mallory Square performing community, where he’s one of the most long-established figures—along with the man famous for a show with his performing house cats, farther along the boardwalk.

Welzien’s longevity means he has an automatic slot at the

square—he's there three nights a week, like clockwork—and doesn't have to take part in the daily lottery for one of the limited spaces. He's performed wedding and memorial services for some of the other performers and vendors, who call him "Bible Bill."

Welzien came to Christ in the 1970s, after wandering the United States and Europe for several years, during which time, he says, "Dozens of people witnessed to me." Those encounters made him recognize the importance of planting the seeds of God's truth at every opportunity.

There's the odd heckler, and once someone snatched his spectacles off and dashed them on the ground. But for the most part, passers-by listen for a few moments and then drift on. Occasionally they will stay for some personal dialogue.

"I don't really know what happens to most of the people that hear the message," says the 50-something veteran preacher, whose long-haul mentality extends to taking part in the annual 12-mile swim round the island, to raise funds for his ministry.

He adds: "But really what I long for is to hear Jesus say, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.'"

Sex, Drugs and Gospel Tracts

Bold Christians share Christ at the annual Fantasy Fest.

Doug, a general contractor, rather likes other men staring at his wife Barb's naked breasts, decorated as part of a dog's

head. "It makes me feel proud of my investment," he says. "I love it."

The \$40 body-painting job is one of the features of Fantasy Fest, a 10-day salute to hedonism held annually in Key West, Florida. Doug says he attends because he "needs to get away from reality every now and then."

Some 80,000 people agree. They squeezed into Key West's narrow streets for the 2004 grand finale Halloween parade of 80 floats celebrating sexuality of any and every variety. Condoms are thrown out along with Mardi Gras-style beads.

Key West's authorities more or less surrender, establishing a "party zone" in which open-container liquor laws are suspended. Public nudity is supposedly still outlawed, but body paint counts as a covering, and there is plenty of exposed flesh to be seen.

Though Fantasy Fest was started almost 30 years ago by gay businessmen looking to breathe life into the town's flagging fall tourist trade—and still has a strong homosexual element—it is as much about heterosexual excess.

"There's people walking around naked, there's drugs and sex in the streets," says Wendy McClain, a 23-year-old ministry student leading a team of young evangelists from the Assemblies of God's Southeastern College. "You have to be prayed up before you come out here because some of the things we encounter are crazy."

While a few local Christians gather in a nearby church to pray, the evangelistic efforts among the crowds are left to a

small group of visitors. McClain's team presents a Stomp-style percussion-and-dance set to draw crowds.

Students with a Youth With A Mission team take a more direct approach, carrying a coffin into the crowd for a short drama. "It fits with the Halloween theme," says Creagon Muldoon, provoking conversations with partyers.

For the outreach leader, Fantasy Fest is much more extreme than Mardi Gras. "It's like all the sexual deviants of the country come down to one small island for a week," he observes.

Elsewhere a group of cross-carriers pass out tracts. Says Brian O'Connell, a fixture at Fantasy Fest and Mardi Gras outreaches: "Unless you give someone the Word of God there's nothing that God can work with."

Key West's Bridge-Builders

Two ministers are reaching gay islanders with God's love.

Lance Hastings built one of the strongest of the few bridges that span the gap between the Christian and gay communities in Key West. The former missionary to Puerto Rico—who moved to the last stop in the necklace of islands making up the picturesque Florida Keys to start an outreach to homosexuals—was named humanitarian of the year in 2001 by the town's largest gay AIDS charity.

As a volunteer for AIDS Help he assisted with fund-raising events and ferried patients to and from medical appointments.

And as he made friends, he found opportunities to talk about God, becoming the group's unofficial chaplain and being asked to go and talk to AIDS patients as they neared death.

"I had some wonderful opportunities to do that, and pray with a number of volunteers as they were in their last stages of life," he recalls.

Hastings found many of the gays he helped had strong spiritual leanings but typically felt rejected by the evangelical church. But he found a lot of goodwill toward Ernie DeLoach's Glad Tidings Community Church—one AIDS patient had the church's business card tagged on his refrigerator to contact as "one of his last projects."

As someone involved in the gay lifestyle himself in the early years of his marriage, Hastings believes that the gay-church divide may not have happened if Christians had responded more lovingly when AIDS first surfaced in the 1980s. In Key West, as in other places, some believers have compromised and others "have simply washed their hands of the whole deal and moved into their own little worlds," he says.

"A few, like Pastor Ernie, are trying to do what they can to show the love of Christ without compromising the truth."

Now directing his own In His Fullness men's ministry in Gainesville, Florida, Hastings says the focus of ministry to gays should be on their needs rather than their desires. "Most gays know the church thinks homosexuality's a sin," he says.

"If anybody knows anything about homosexuality they know it's not about sex so much as emotional issues," he observes. "The

issues men face are all the same—validity, affirmation by another man, intimacy, and how does God fit into my life? What differs is how they get them worked out.”

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