

Pro-Gay Policies Challenge Christians

Ministry leaders say believers must balance outreach to homosexuals with political activism

After a string of unprecedented public policy gains for the gay community this summer, ministry leaders say Christians must keep a clear head about homosexuality and not be intimidated into silence.

"The confusion in the culture is increasing to such an extent that more people will ... become more vulnerable to [homosexuality]," said Andrew Comiskey, an ordained Vineyard minister and founder of Desert Stream Ministries, which ministers to homosexuals and those who are sexually broken. "If Christians got involved in speaking to the culture, it could have a tremendous effect. ... There are a lot of people who have a problem with gay marriage. They're not homophobic. They're not violent toward homosexuals ... but they don't want to make it normative."

Clarity, he said, is the church's greatest strength in the wake of public policy gains that are being described as historic. In June the Supreme Court struck down Texas' anti-sodomy law, ruling 6-3 that homosexuals "are entitled to respect for their private lives," Justice Anthony Kennedy said.

The same month, the Canadian province of Ontario legalized same-sex unions, prompting efforts to legitimize gay unions throughout the nation. In August, the Episcopal Church USA elected an openly gay priest to serve as a bishop, and California Gov. Gray Davis passed a law fining businesses

\$150,000 if they refused to hire cross-dressers. In September the Harvey Milk School, the first publicly funded high school for gay students, opened in New York City.

Those moves don't include the introduction of the University of Michigan course explaining how to be gay, or the surprising popularity of the Bravo cable channel's *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, which was followed this fall by the first gay dating show, *Boy Meets Boy*, also on Bravo.

Nor do they hint at the growth of the gay Christian movement, which includes an increasing number of "welcoming" churches that describe themselves as Spirit-filled, embracing prophetic dance, intercession, miracles and deliverance.

Though he does not consider himself or his congregation to be politically active, the Rev. Douglas E. Clanton, head of Reconciling Pentecostals International (RPI), a network of 25 gay-friendly congregations, filed a friend of the court brief in the June Supreme Court case *Lawrence v. Texas*, explaining how he interprets Scripture to affirm homosexuality.

The vast majority of Pentecostal groups decried the decision, but Clanton, an openly gay former United Pentecostal Church (UPC) minister, believes he helped make history. "We have the distinction of being the only Pentecostal representative in this brief that was considered by the highest court in the land," he wrote in a letter posted on RPI's Web site. "We have so much to be thankful for and a lot to celebrate. God is truly liberating His remnant people."

Liberty from homosexuality can be found in Christ, ex-gay ministers told *Charisma*, but they said only a minority of

churches offer relevant ministry to gays and lesbians. Pastor Darryl Foster, a former homosexual who now leads Restoration Church Atlanta and helps train urban churches in ex-gay ministry, said his biggest opposition has been from pastors. "I've had people tell me we don't have to have ministry to homosexuals," he said.

Meanwhile, the leaders of gay-friendly charismatic churches say the caliber of ministers in their circuit is improving, and Christians with same-sex attractions are finding a refuge in their congregations. "The trend in the gay community is toward Spirit-filled worship," said Randy Duncan, pastor of New Life Community Church of Hope in LaPorte, Ind. "People tell me they didn't expect God to be here, but He is here in Spirit and power and love—lots of love."

Clanton said the pro-gay policy moves this summer will likely polarize the church—and he believes that is a good thing. He said there are many gay men and women who have quietly been allowed to remain on worship teams and on staff at Pentecostal and charismatic churches. He said now pastors will have to "be more heavy handed in dealing with homosexuality. Are we going to allow these people on the platform?"

Foster said the answer is easy. "Anybody who is in unrepentant sin should not be allowed to serve in leadership," he said. Yet he admits the scales are often unbalanced. "People who are involved in homosexuality are set down, but no ministry is set up for them to deal with the sin problem."

John Wescott, executive director of Exchange Ministries, an ex-gay ministry in Orlando, Fla., said he believes many pastors are naïve about the number of people in their churches who struggle with same-sex attraction. But he said Christians

hold the key, noting that he found freedom from homosexuality with the help of a local church. "They embraced me, they loved me, but when they needed to they confronted me," Wescott said.

Ideally, Christians should offer relevant ministry while challenging pro-gay policies, ex-gay ministers say. "It's time for the Christian community to stop sitting on the sidelines and be apathetic about public policy," said Randy Thomas, ministries and media relations manager for Exodus International. "At the same time we don't need to fall into the trap of polarized thinking. We cannot forget the faces. Christ is more concerned about the condition of a person's heart. It's not really a hard balance, but it's a hard perspective to grasp in a culture war."

Those on the front lines of that culture war want more Christians to get involved. In September the Canadian Parliament rejected a motion to define marriage as a union between one man and one woman by a 137-132 margin. At press time the issue was still being hotly debated, but Parliament also had passed a bill extending hate speech laws to protect gays and lesbians. Concerned Women for America is one of several Christian groups that believe such classification could be used to label condemnation of homosexuality based on biblical passages as hate speech.

Conservative groups in the United States fear similar legislation may pass here. Focus on the Family has a link on its Web site to the American Family Association's , which is drumming up support for the Federal Marriage Amendment, designed in part to prevent the Massachusetts Supreme Court from legalizing gay marriage. At press time the group had secured more than a half million signatures.

The Assemblies of God is urging its constituents to support this legislation, and various grass-roots organizations, such as the Theological Education Institute's , are leading similar campaigns to defend traditional marriage.

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