



TOM SPAIN/STAFF

**Candace Chellew-Hodge eventually became pastor of the Columbia Metropolitan Community Church.**

# Gay faith issues heat up in election year

BY MICHAEL GARTLAND  
*Of The Post and Courier Staff*

Twenty-three years ago in a small Georgia town, just beyond a hill that people raced their cars over, Candace Chellew decided she'd kill herself.

"I came out to one of my best friends, and she was very negative," she recalls. "I was 16 when I was really dealing with it."

For what seemed like hours, she sat in the center in the road, waiting for a sudden flash of metal to take her life. Then something entirely unexpected caught her eye.

"There was a cat on the side of the road, but it wouldn't come over," she said. "I went to pet it, and as soon as I got up, this car crested the hill."

Now, Chellew is Chellew-Hodge. She is 39, much more comfortable about her sexuality and in a union with an-

other woman. Her story is like that of many Americans who were raised with religion and in adolescence discovered themselves to be gay.

In recent months, straight Americans, whether they like it or not, have paid much closer attention to the testimonies of gays and lesbians. Issues such as same-sex marriage and the ordination of gay clergy now receive national media attention, and have made the debate over faith and sexual orientation more pitched than ever.

Part of the reason can be traced to Canada, Belgium and the Netherlands. All three countries adopted same-sex marriage before a Massachusetts court ruled earlier this year that gay and lesbian couples legally could marry.

The debate has gone on much longer than that, though.

Catherine Kroeger teaches human sexuality at Gordon-Conwell Theologi-

cal Seminary in Massachusetts. She said the discussion isn't new. It has been taking place in gay enclaves in San Francisco and New York for decades.

"For five years, there's been a broader public debate," she said.

When people who don't normally discuss the issues finally broach them, it's often difficult to bring the conversation to an end. The biggest challenge is getting it started in the first place, Kroeger said.

Politicians running for office have been especially cautious in this regard.

In order to avoid alienating gay voters as well as religious conservatives, neither Democratic presidential candidate Sen. John Kerry nor his running mate, Sen. John Edwards, voted on the federal marriage amendment when it

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# Gay faith issues heating up among church denominations, especially in this close election year

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came to the Senate this July. In the South Carolina Senate race, a distinctively more conservative battle, both Republican U.S. Rep. Jim DeMint and Democratic nominee Inez Tenenbaum have heralded their support of that amendment, which would define marriage as an institution for only men and women to share. "The definition of marriage should be maintained by law," DeMint said. "The government should not be able to come in and change our values."

Many church leaders around the state consider such a strong stance a blessing. Chellew-Hodge and other religious leaders disagree.

How to frame the debate can be just as important as what's being debated, and many see it as a separation of church and state issue. The Rev. Debra W. Haffner leads the Religious Institute on Sexual Morality, Justice, and Healing. She said the federal government's failure to allow same-sex unions indicates blatant discrimination against the denominations that allow them.

"There are more than 10 denominations that allow them," Haffner said. "Those same services don't provide legal benefits to anyone."

Conversely, when a straight couple marries in a church, the legal benefits of civil marriage are automatically conferred.

"The government is discriminating because it's not recognizing some religious marriages," she said. "There is an authentic religious voice both grounded in Scripture and tradition that supports the right of same-sex couples to marry."

Evan Wolfson, the author of "Why Marriage Matters: America, Equality, and Gay People's Right to Marry," said it's simply a matter of churches overstepping their bounds.

"What we're looking for is the legal right to marry, not the religious rite to marry," he said. "No church should dictate to the government who gets a marriage license under the law."

As the daughter of a conservative Baptist preacher, Chellew-Hodge was not brought up to view marriage from that point of view. In adolescence, she could not con-

fide in her father but did speak to her mother about her attraction to other young women. Her mom told her it might just be a passing phase.

Now, Chellew-Hodge performs holy unions for same-sex couples in South Carolina and edits an online magazine for gay Christians, whosoever.org.

Coming to terms with her faith was not easy.

"I don't remember my father preaching any anti-gay sermons, but you just knew," she said.

After abandoning the Baptist church as a teen, she studied Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Daoism, but by her early 20s, she came back to Christianity. She is now a member of Metropolitan Community Churches, a gay-friendly denomination.

Most modern Western religions do not fully accept homosexuality. Religious leaders often cite Scripture as their reason. In discussing the issue, leaders of Christian denominations often repeat the phrase, "You can love the sinner without loving the sin."

Jewish denominations are split on the issue. Reform congregations typically embrace gays and

lesbians. Orthodox Jews see it differently. Within Reform Judaism opinion varies on whether same-sex marriage should be permitted.

"From an Orthodox perspective, nothing like this could be accepted," said Rabbi Anthony Holz of Kahal Kadosh Beth Elohim, the Reform synagogue downtown. "The Reform perspective is be as accepting as possible and as welcoming as possible to people who are gay and lesbian."

Christian denominations, such as the Episcopal Church and Presbyterian Church USA, have debated these issues from within, and both are struggling with resolution. Many feel that the issue of gay ordination could split churches.

The Rev. John Paul Brown of Mount Zion AME in downtown Charleston said discussion rarely broaches issues such as same-sex marriage or ordination of gays. Judging from the secular debate, though, Brown thinks the issue eventually will arise for the AME church.

"Scripture says it's an abomination," he said. "They would not be put out of the church, but the

church would not accept it as a moral way of life."

Leaders from the United Methodist Church offer similar answers. The Rev. Robert Cox of St. Andrews Parish cited the church's Book of Discipline.

"It's our church law, our church theology, our church structure," he said. "The United Methodist Church says the practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

For many pastors, allowing same-sex marriage would contribute to the controversy.

"That takes it even further," said the Rev. Marty Hogue of Dorchester-Waylyn Baptist

Church in North Charleston. "The pressures come from society. We are taught by Scripture that we are to influence society, society is not supposed to influence us."

The Rev. Tommy Hutson leads the Metropolitan Community Church in North Charleston and puts gay marriage in a different scriptural context.

"It's more important for people to realize we're all children of God," he said.

"The God we believe in is inclusive of all people."

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