"I believe God made me this way, and he loves me this way."

— The Rev. CANDACE CHELLEW-HODGE of Sumter

Gay Christians yearn for place at the table

As mainline churches resist, gays practice their faith elsewhere

By CHRISTINA LEE KNAUSS
Staff Writer

Gay and Christian. For many Christians, the combination is unimaginable. But for many Columbia-area gays and lesbians who are Christian, the combination is very real and often frustrating.

"It's an area of my life that gets challenged a lot," the Rev. Candace Chellew-Hodge of Sumter said of her sexual orientation. "But I believe God made me this way, and he loves me this way."

More and more gay Christians no longer want to worship while hiding the person they say God made them to be. In Columbia, as in communities around the country, gay and lesbian Christians are worshiping in their own congregations and calling for mainline churches to address the issue of homosexuality.

Still, few issues divide Christians like that of homosexuality, as seen in the debate last year over the ordination of the Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop, and last month in Washington, D.C., when President Obama made his case for allowing gays to serve openly in the military.

The Rev. Candace Chellew-Hodge speaks to the congregation at the Metropolitan Community Church of Columbia as the Rev. Andy Sidden looks on.

The Rev. Andy Sidden prepares for services at the door of his office at the church.
What the Scripture says about homosexuality

In the debate over homosexuality, certain passages in the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible are quoted, with varying opinions:

**FUNDAMENTALISTS**, traditionalists and conservatives tend to believe these passages are the direct word of God and specifically say homosexual acts go against God's will.

**MODERATES** and liberals tend to believe many of the Bible's injunctions about sexuality and other issues relate to the culture of the time when the books were written and should be interpreted with that in mind.

**OLD TESTAMENT**

**GENESIS 2**: The creation story, particularly Genesis 2:18-22, tells of the creation of Eve.

**GENESIS 19**: The story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah tells of the impure acts of the Sodomites. Scholars have said the exact acts are never described; some believe it is homosexual sex, while others say further reading of Genesis and Ezekiel indicate the Sodomites were punished for inospitality and pride.

**LEVITICUS 18:22**: “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman, that is detestable.” Also 20:13. Scholars have said

See Scripture Page D5

Gay and Christian.

For many Christians, the combination is unimaginable. But for many Columbia-area gays and lesbians who are Christian, the combination is very real and often frustrating.

“It’s an area of my life that gets challenged a lot,” the Rev. Candace Chellaw-Hodge of Sumter said of her sexual orientation. “But I believe God made me this way, and he loves me this way.”

More and more gay Christians no longer want to worship while hiding the person they say God made them to be. In Columbia, as in communities around the country, gay and lesbian Christians are worshipping in their own congregations and calling for mainline churches to address the issue of homosexuality.

Still, few issues divide Christians like that of homosexuality, as seen in the debate last year over the ordination of the Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop, and last month in Massachusetts, where same-sex marriage was legalized.

It comes down to this: Gays and lesbians say their spiritual journey is more challenging because fellow Christians judge them for their sexual orientation instead of accepting them for their belief in God.

“There are leaders in the Christian church who are adulterers and who commit other sins, and no one questions their faith,” said Chellaw-Hodge, 38, a nondenominational minister. “Death-row murderers can suddenly accept Christ, and that’s not a problem. But some people think gay people can’t be true Christians.”

Some members of the mainline Christian community in the Midlands say, however, that Scripture clearly maintains that homosexual relationships are incompatible with traditional Christian values.

“When the Bible talks about a union between man and woman, it's very specific,” said the Rev. Stephen Singleton, pastor of Pine Grove AME Church in the St. Andrews community. “There is no indication in Scripture that God would sanction, for instance, a marital union between two members of the same gender.”

See Faith Page D5

INSIDE | How some Christian groups are using faith to try to convince homosexuals to live straight lives | PAGE D6

Where various denominations stand on homosexuality | PAGE D6 Gay Christian support groups | PAGE D6
The important thing... is believing in Christ

MISSING JESUS

Buffy Simms, 28, a retired social worker who grew up in Columbia and attends Metropolitan Community Church, often called MCC, said his faith has helped him through difficulties in his life, including depression. He has been "Christian" all his life and was a member of Trinity Episcopal Cathedral in Columbia for many years.

"I have no problem reconciling my life as a gay man with my life as a Christian," he said. "If you look at the Bible, you see Jesus didn't say anything about same-sex unions. The important thing for me is believing in Christ."

A lifelong friend of the Rev. Chris Ewing, who lives near Columbia, said Ewing is also an important Christian figure to him. The two have been friends for over 20 years.

HENT 1: This attraction can also be extremely useful for one nitted in the context of the Jewish faith, who has been raised in a religious community.

1: Do the rest, the money, and the rest of the decisions in the context of this attraction.

FATH 1: I have been raised as a Christian.

Sidden lives with his partner of 21 years in Newberry.

"Dialogue on the roles of gay and lesbian in the church needs to begin," said Sidden. "We need to ask ourselves if we're reading the Scriptures as Christians, or as members of MCC."

Sidden is the minister of the church in Newberry, which is one of the largest MCCs in the United States. The church has a congregation of about 200 members.

"The Southern Baptist Convention does not accept the homosexual lifestyle or ordains," said Joe Mack, director of public policy and external affairs at the Southern Baptist Convention. This is the largest denomination in the state at the same time, we would not ordain homosexuals. This is because we believe in the Bible and the Bible says that homosexuality is a sin."

"I believe the Bible is clear on this," he said. "I believe that all people have the right to live their lives as they choose, but I do not believe that the church should endorse anything that goes against the Bible."
Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor males who practice sodomy, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor slanderers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. Scholars say the translation of the passage, also written by Paul, has been altered with the word "masturbation" sometimes appearing instead of the phrase for homosexual sex. Scholars also argue that Paul is speaking to a broader context of sexual immorality of all sorts, and committed same-sex relationships are never mentioned in any of the scriptures.

Some passages of the New Testament cite to affirm their beliefs:

HYN 3:16-18: "For God loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

I TIMOTHY 2:37-40: Jesus commands his followers to love the Lord, and to "love your neighbor yourself."

HEBREVS 2:8-9: "For grace is given that you may be saved through faith."

LATINS 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither is there male nor female; for you are all in Christ Jesus."

Siddon lives with his partner of 21 years in Newberry.

"Dialogue on the role of gays and lesbians in the church needs to begin with Scripture," Britt said. "We need to ask ourselves if we're reading those Scriptures that seem to prohibit homosexuality in the way they were meant to be read. A lot of the confusion out there is also grounded in people. People wonder where being accepting will lead."

Chellew-Hodge said while that approach may be fine for some, it's not one that the church — and many other gay and lesbians — can accept.

A PLACE TO WORSHIP

The Rev. Andy Siddon, 53, pastor at MCC-Columbia, grew up in the United Methodist Church in North Carolina and started attending churches, but are not always open about their orientation because they are not certain how congregations will react, said Harriet Heimbach, Columbia, attorney who is president of the local branch of Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays.

Most mainline Christian clergy say that although their denominations believe gay relationships go against Scripture, they don't discourage gays and lesbians from worshiping with them.

"The Southern Baptist Convention doesn't accept the homosexual lifestyle or condone it," said Joe Mack, director of public policy for the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest denomination in the state. "At the same time, we don't condemn homosexuals. The phrase 'love the sinner, hate the sin' is a cliche, but it could be used to apply to our approach.

The mainline denomination that has received the most attention recently for its stance on issues of gay rights is the Episcopalian Church USA, which is dealing with the response to last year's confirmation of the denomination's first openly gay bishop. While the Episcopal Diocese of Upper South Carolina, the "don't ask, don't tell" mentality that many black churches and Protestant churches in general, take on the issue of gays.

"Homosexuality was something that was just never talked about in church when I was growing up, and it's still the same way today," McEwen said. "I've heard pastors who have never even mentioned it on a Sunday morning. I'm just wondering if I am wrong or we may wish there was more open discussion.

Local clergy back up McEwen's description. Singleton said he has never addressed homosexuality at Pine Grove AME because it hasn't been an issue in his congregation.

Britt, of Trenholm Road United Methodist, said the Christian church in general has done a poor job of discussing homosexuality.

"It's one of the issues impacting society, and the church should be addressing it," he said. "We've come to the point where we can no longer pretend we have nothing to say about this issue."

Reach Knau at (803) 771-8507 or cknau@thestate.com.

Members of the Metropolitan Community Church walk in a Pride March in this March 2004 photograph.

METROPOLITAN COMMUNITY CHURCH OF COLUMBIA

This is Columbia's only Christian church that ministers primarily to the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, their friends and families. There are heterosexual members in the congregation as well.

HISTORY: Columbia church founded in 1993; took name of Metropolitan Community Church in 1995.

LOCATION: 1111 Bellevue St., off North Main Street in Columbia.

WORSHIP SERVICES: 11 a.m. Sunday

PASTOR: Rev. Andy Siddon

CONGREGATION: 93 members; worship regularly attracts more from the Midlands and areas as far away as Florence.

PLANS: MCC Columbia has purchased property off Atlas Road in southeast Columbia and hopes to break ground for a worship center later this year.

OTHER ACTIVITIES: Care Circles gather twice monthly in homes for prayer, devotion and fellowship; Women's Spirituality Group, Children's Church.

CONTACT: (803) 256-2154 or on the Web at www.mccolumbiaisc.org