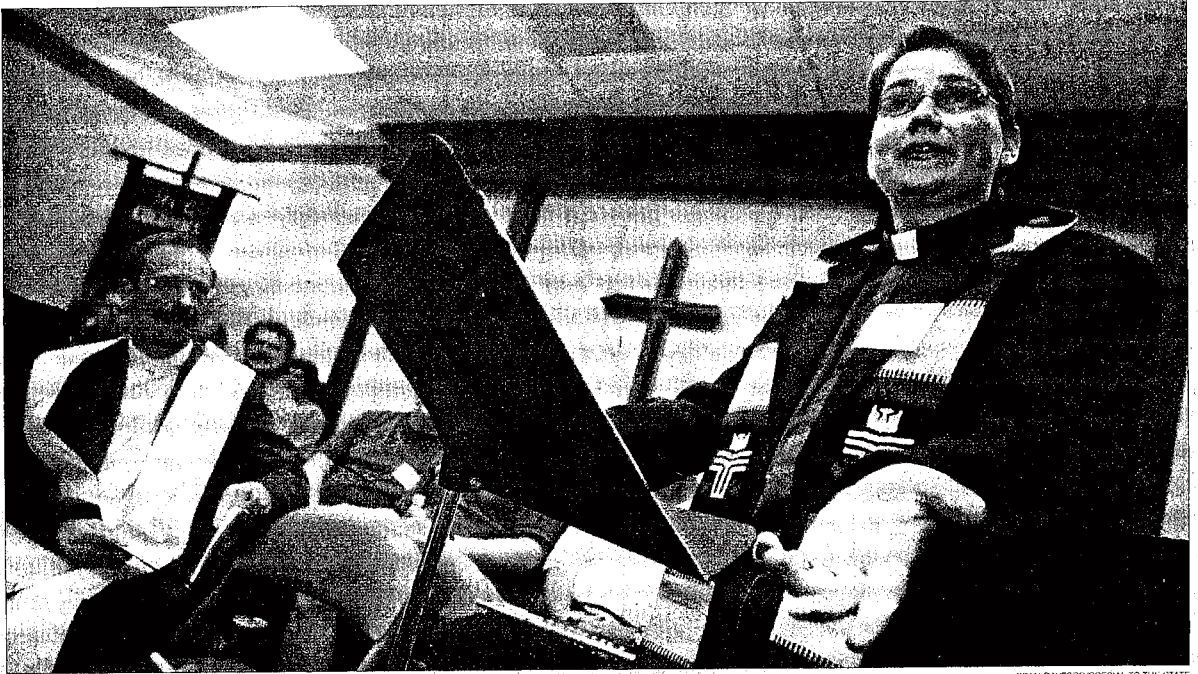


# IMPACT

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2004 • SECTION D

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

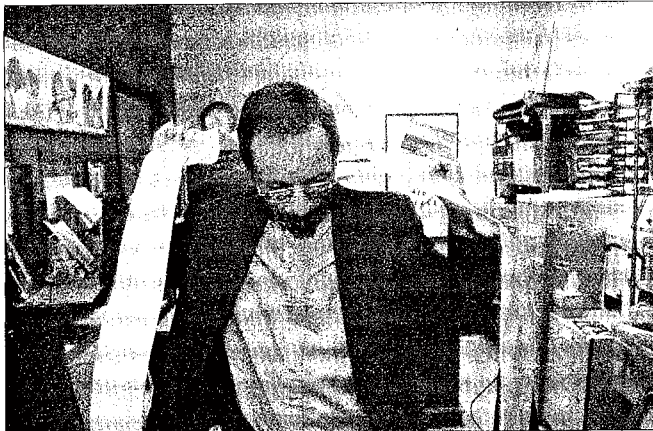
— The Rev. CANDACE CHELLEW-HODGE of Sumter



SEAN RAYFORD/SPECIAL TO THE STATE

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

## Gay Christians yearn for place at the table



RICH GUICH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Rev. Andy Sidden prepares for services at the door of his office at the church.

As mainline churches resist, gays practice their faith elsewhere

By CHRISTINA LEE KNAUSS  
Staff Writer

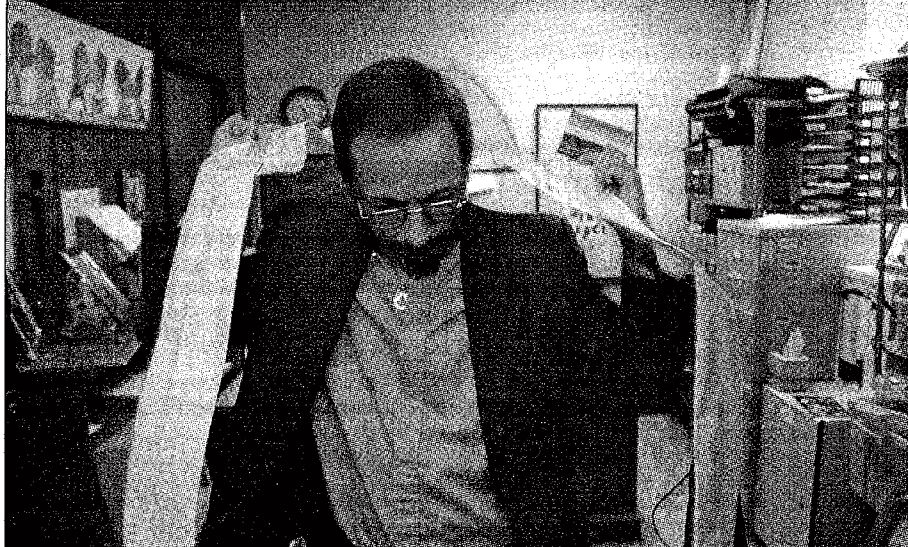
Gay and Christian.

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 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



RICH GLICKSTEIN/THE STATE

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 inhospitality 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

## resist, gays practice their faith elsewhere

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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 Chellew-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."

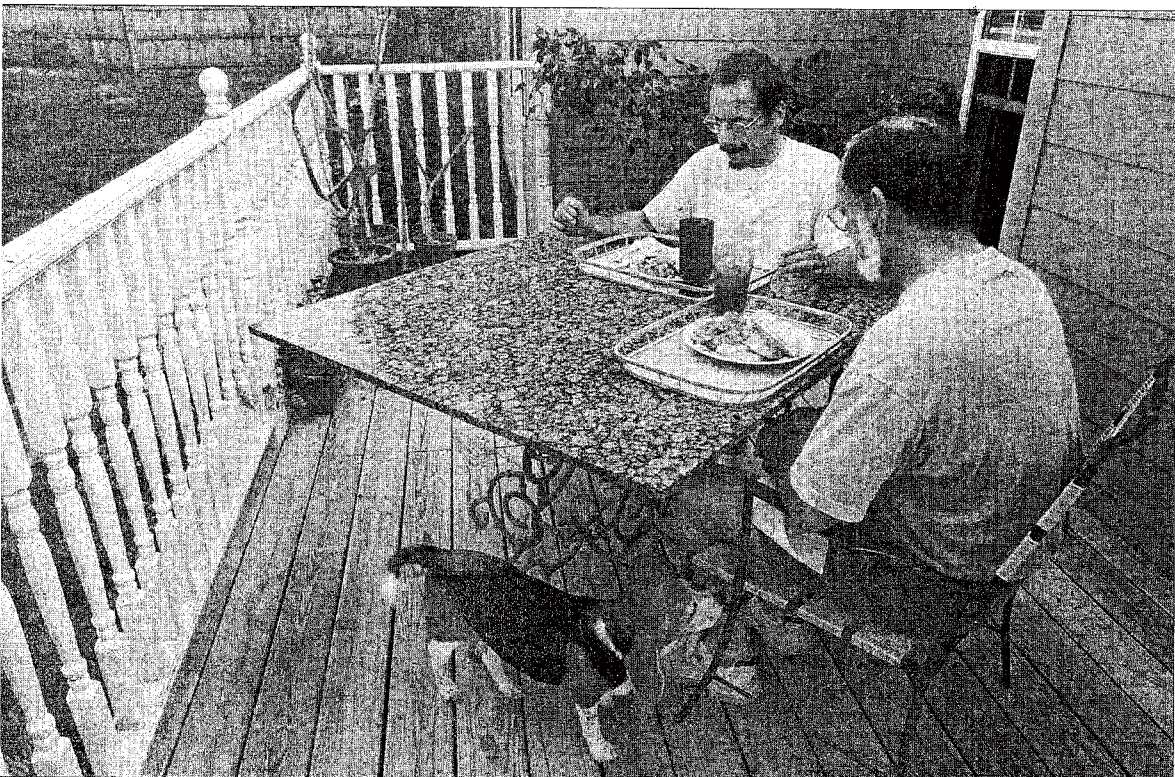
SEE **FAITH** PAGE D5

**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**



## RELIGION AND HOMOSEXUALITY



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICH GLICKSTEIN/THE STATE

Rev. Sidden and his partner, Kevin Dove, say grace before dinner on the back deck of their home.

# 'The important thing . . . is believing in Christ'

FAITH FROM PAGE D1

## MISSING JESUS

Billy Maddox, 58, 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 longing for Christ drew Chellew-Hodge back to Christianity after drifting away from the religion of her youth.

She grew up "steeped" in the church; her father was a Southern Baptist minister. During her teen years, she fell away from Christianity after her parents divorced and as she struggled with her own coming out as a lesbian at 16.

"I understood from what I'd been taught by traditional Christianity that God didn't love me if I was a lesbian . . . so I decided I didn't need God," she said.

She tried other spiritual paths, including attending a Unitarian Universalist church, but rediscovered Christianity after a difficult relationship.

"I realized I missed Jesus," she said.

That's not an unusual reaction, according to the Rev. David Hess, a Baptist minister who leads the West Henrietta Baptist Church in West Henrietta, New York, and has written extensively on the issue of how Christianity treats gays and lesbians.

"The thing about Christianity that is so attractive to (the gay community) is Jesus himself," Hess said. "In the gospels, Jesus



Sidden lives with his partner of 21 years in Newberry.

sity of South Carolina, lives in Sumter with her partner, is an assistant pastor at the Columbia MCC, and publishes Whosoever.com, an online magazine for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Christians.

She said she chose the MCC because the church allowed her to participate fully in the worship experience and now gives her an opportunity to lead as a member of the clergy.

In that way, MCC differs from some "welcoming" mainline Christian churches that accept gays and

"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 fear. People wonder where being accepting will lead."

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

tending a Metropolitan Community Church in Charlotte after going through a divorce and coming out as a gay man in the early '80s.

He began study for ordination in the MCC denomination in 1988 and was ordained in 1992 in Florida.

Now he lives in Newberry with his partner of 20 years and leads MCC-Columbia. The church has 93 members, but Sidden said it serves more people, including some from as far away as Florence.

Worship combines elements from many Christian denominations, including weekly Communion, one-on-one prayer and lively services that include lots of music — from the traditional Protestant hymn "Praise to the Lord The Almighty" to the modern "Let There Be Peace on Earth."

"In the past, many gays and lesbians have had to choose between going to a church that prided itself on being open and one that offered great worship, but wouldn't bless a same-sex couple or ordain a gay person," he said. "The MCC offers both."

Gays and lesbians also regularly attend mainline Christian churches, but are not always open about their orientation because they are not certain how congregations will react, said Harriet Hancock, a 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 worshipping with them.

"The Southern Baptist Convention doesn't accept the homosexual lifestyle or condone it," said Joe Mack, director of public policy for the South Carolina 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 cliché, but it

which governs the Columbia area, does not allow same-sex unions in its churches, diocesan leaders have called for gays and lesbians to be welcomed to worship and for there to be open discussion of issues related to their concerns.

MCC, which also has heterosexual members, has purchased land for a 3,600-square-foot worship and activity center off Atlas Road; members hope to break ground by the end of summer.

"Once we get that church built, no little kid growing up in this area now who finds out they are gay or lesbian will have to say, 'There's not a church here for me,'" Sidden said. "We'll be able to tell that child there is such a church, and people like you designed it, built it and paid for it."

## DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL

Alvin McEwen, 33, was raised in the black Baptist community and sometimes attends Baptist churches in the Columbia area. Since coming out as gay while in college, he has had the open support of his family — but the church has been different.

He experienced what he calls 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 had pastors who have never even mentioned the issue. I can separate my faith in God from the ceremony of the church — church isn't my only experience as a Christian — but I just 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 Trenchholm Road United Methodist, said the Christian church in general has done a poor



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 male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor windlills will inherit the kingdom of God." Scholars have said the translation of his passage, also written by Paul, has been varied, with the word "masturbation" sometimes appearing instead of the phrase for homosexual sex. Scholars also have argued that Paul as speaking to gratuitous sexual relations of all sorts, at committed same-sex relationships are never mentioned in any of the scriptures.

*Some passages gay and lesbian Christians cite to affirm their beliefs:*

**1HN 3:16-18:** "For God loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, at whosoever believes in him should not perish but we everlasting life."

**1ATHEW 22:37-40:** Jesus commands his followers: to love the Lord, and to "love your neighbor yourself."

**HESIANS 2:8-9:** "For grace are ye saved through faith."

**LATIANS 3:28:** "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female; for ye all are in Christ Jesus."

tianity that God didn't love me if I was a lesbian ... so I decided I didn't need God," she said.

She tried other spiritual paths, including attending a Unitarian Universalist church, but rediscovered Christianity after a difficult relationship.

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"The thing about Christianity that is so attractive to (the gay community) is Jesus himself," Hess said. "In the gospels, Jesus identified with the marginalized, and they recognized Jesus as a friend."

Chellaw-Hodge's return to church led her to pursue another dream — the ministry. She graduated from Emory University's Candler School of Theology in 2002 and was ordained a non-denominational minister in December 2003.

Now she works at the Univer-



**Sidden lives with his partner of 21 years in Newberry.**

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She said she chose the MCC because the church allowed her to participate fully in the worship experience and now gives her an opportunity to lead as a member of the clergy.

In that way, MCC differs from some "welcoming" mainline Christian churches that accept gays and lesbians who are "out" to worship in their ranks, but might not encourage them to lead worship or function in another leadership capacity.

The Rev. Don Britt, pastor at Trenholm Road United Methodist Church, said this approach is not uncommon in mainline churches, largely because of confusion about what Scripture says about homosexuality.

"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 fear. People wonder where being accepting will lead."

Chellaw-Hodge said while that approach may be fine for some, it's not one that she — and many other gays and lesbians — can accept.

"I couldn't go to a church where I'm not accepted for who I am," Chellaw-Hodge said. "Some people can attend a church where they're accepted but don't have full participation, but I can't do that."

## A PLACE TO WORSHIP

The Rev. Andy Sidden, 53, pastor at MCC-Columbia, grew up in the United Methodist Church in North Carolina and started at-

churches, but are not always open about their orientation because they are not certain how congregations will react, said Harriet Hancock, a Columbia attorney who is president of the local branch of Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays.

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The mainline denomination that has received the most attention recently for its stance on issues of gay rights is the Episcopal 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, "many black churches, and Protestant churches in general, take on the issue of gays."

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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 needs to be in conversation about it," he said. "We've come to the point where we can no longer pretend we have nothing to say about this issue."

Reach Knauss at (803) 771-8507 or [cknauss@thestate.com](mailto:cknauss@thestate.com).



SEAN RAYFORD/SPECIAL TO THE STATE

**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 Sidden

**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.mccolumbiasc.org](http://www.mccolumbiasc.org)