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Pasadena conference presses church to accept and bless gay
relationships

by James Solheim

(ENS) When Andrew Sullivan asserted that marriage is the single most important justice issue facing the gay community, many of the 350 people in the ballroom of the Pasadena Hilton nodded their heads in agreement. "The truth is that we are not seeking the right to marry--we have it, but it's being denied," he asserted.

Sullivan, senior editor of *The New Republic* magazine, was the keynoter among a dozen speakers at a conference sponsored by All Saints Church in Pasadena on the theme, "Beyond Inclusion--celebrating gay and lesbian commitments and ministries in the Episcopal Church."

For three days participants listened to a string of theological presentations and responses and questions, joined in Eucharist, saw the premiere of a play based roughly on the heresy trial of Bishop Walter Righter, and met in small groups to lay a strategy on the local, regional and national level for full acceptance of gay and lesbian relationships.

"We are living through a sea change... the acceptance of gays and lesbians is happening everywhere," said Righter in his sermon at the opening Eucharist April 11. "Don't underestimate this church," he urged, because "there is a quiet revolution going on in many places about inclusion."

A quiet revolution

As the rector of All Saints, Ed Bacon, Jr., said in his welcome, the purpose of the conference was "to bear witness that homosexuality is a gift from God, to the church and to the world and that the inclusive love and justice of God demands that we open sacramental ministry to all."

At a press conference with Righter, Bacon announced plans for a booth at the upcoming General Convention where participants could meet and talk with couples whose relationships have been blessed by the church "so that the church can see that this love is real."

Righter expressed a worry that the "quiet revolution" of openness would "lose energy and momentum" but added that he is still convinced that the attempt to put him on trial for ordaining a non-celibate homosexual "has outed the whole Episcopal Church."

Calling out and coming out

"We have been meeting the Good News as we discover that God speaks to gay men and lesbians as powerfully as to heterosexuals," said Prof. William Countryman of Church Divinity School of the Pacific in one of five papers presented at the conference. He explored the theme of "calling out and coming out," how God calls us "to leave a familiar environment, to move towards a new world."

Calling the closet "spiritually dangerous," Countryman said that God calls us to be honest about our lives because the "habit of concealment will turn into the habit of hypocrisy, the willful blinding to truth." When that concealment "becomes a way of life, it becomes a way of death" and results in "letting go the dream of being like everyone else."

"Gay people are not offered the opportunity to celebrate their sexual identity," said Prof. Patricia Jung of Chicago's Loyola University, because "heterosexism denies gay people the right to safe haven, other than the closet." Since most heterosexuals claim that theirs is "the only norm, the only orientation," they conclude that homosexuality is evil and that "gay people are a threat to society." It won't be possible to dismantle this heterosexism until "we challenge the sexual ethic at its core," she said. And the first step is to correct misinformation about the lives of gay people and work for complete civil rights.

A cruel irony

Andrew Sullivan couldn't agree more. In an interview he pointed out that "the civil rights movement disrupted a way of life that was working--but it wasn't equality." He is worried that "the movement will be compromised, bought off." The role of the church is to fill what he called "a huge gulf in ethical/moral teaching" and join in the dialogue on civil rights because "no civil rights movement has succeeded without the churches. Until we have won over the church, it will be difficult to win over the country."

"The right to marry is an even deeper legal right than the right to vote," Sullivan argued. "It is clearly inalienable, granted absolutely to everyone, and the government cannot infringe in any way because it is so intrinsic to our concept of the pursuit of happiness." The exclusion of gay people is "a sign of the depth of disenfranchisement" and yet "gay people have internalized so deeply their sense of inferiority that they don't believe that they deserve it."

For Sullivan, who sees a "desperate search for intimacy" in society, it is "a cruel paradox and irony" to exclude gays from an institution that "could help us achieve intimacy." That is why the movement in Hawaii to legalize marriage for gays is crucial, of "historical proportions." While he predicted that it will be "a long and

difficult fight against the odds," the issue is not legal or political, it's about "faith in the right of all human beings to love one another" without limits based on gender.

Hearts need to be changed

If Sullivan is the voice of the future, author and activist priest Malcolm Boyd said that he didn't mind being one of the "elders" in the movement. In his sermon he pointed out that "this is the first generation of gay liberation, the first generation of gay elders." At the age of 73 he looked back to his early experience in a slum parish in inner-city Indianapolis when blacks could not enter the church. "There are many stories that document the church's long refusal to be inclusive," he said.

"The question the church faces today in regard to gay men and lesbians is this: Does it love unconditionally?" he asked. "Does it love enough to heal the wounds of centuries of persecution, torture and debasement? Does it love enough to ask for forgiveness for things done and left undone?"

Gay people aren't exactly "knocking down the doors of mainline churches, begging to be let inside." On the contrary, Boyd observed that many gays are saying that the church doesn't have "a spirituality we can identify with because it has never included our humanity."

"Our task is to move beyond inclusion," Boyd added. "It isn't enough to change laws--hearts need to be changed. We need dialogue in place of debate. Honesty and openness."

The focus for the church should "no longer be on whether the church wishes to be inclusive" but rather on "the mission field, attempting to interpret the Gospel of Christ so that people will come in," Boyd said, citing "All Saints as just such a parish."

The church with the radical welcome

During a forum on the last day of the conference, former rector George Regas described how All Saints evolved in its understanding of an inclusive ministry. It began with what he called "a radical welcome, a life-changing invitation to come to the table." Gays were drawn to the church, testing its seriousness, but discovering a "place of integrity," according to Regas.

Soon, however, he was "pushed to the wall" by gay members on the blessing issue. While he was clear about his commitment to justice issues, he was still struggling with homosexuality as a part of God's creation.

When he was approached by a gay couple in 1987 he had to admit that he "wasn't ready, and the staff of the church was divided." He offered a private blessing but the couple said that it would rather wait until they could express their commitment in the company of family and

friends.

In 1990 he was struck hard by the demands of the prophet Amos to "let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream." And like Martin Luther King, Jr., Regas knew that "justice delayed was justice denied." So he asked the parish to join in a

"pilgrimage of discussion and prayer" that led to the blessing of a relationship in January of 1992.

When the story broke in the press, pickets appeared at the church

and there were threatening phone calls and obscene mail. And yet the way Regas described it, "The walls around us crumbled, a burden had been lifted and we could grow into fullness of life as God had intended."

While he said he realized that he was "putting the parish at deep risk, taking it deep into uncertain waters, we trusted that truth would be vindicated and validated because of the inclusive love of Jesus. And we saw that it was possible to do the right thing and survive."

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