

The Church, Gays, and Archives

by **HAROLD AVERILL**

The attitude of religious denominations towards homosexuality has long generated controversy amongst lesbians and gays. As one gay writer from a strongly religious background put it:

The view of a mean and vengeful god and that warped view of morality got me into very serious trouble. I genuinely began to think . . . that my only alternative was to kill myself . . . [Now] the God I grew up with no longer exists for me. To believe in that God would be to deny my own existence.¹

The majority of lesbians and gays share his feelings and are not active in any church. Some work within traditional denominations as individuals, either in a lay capacity or as ordained ministers and priests. Still others are members of lesbian/gay lay groups affiliated with the more established denominations in Canada, the United States, Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand. Perhaps as many lesbians and gays belong to congregations of "their" church, the Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Churches [MCC].

These organizations grew out of changes in the lesbian/gay movement in the United States in the 1960s that coincided with a wave of activism sweeping the American churches. The intense resentment that the Judeo-Christian stance on homosexuality had created amongst lesbians and gays came as a shock to socially aware ministers working amongst the street people of San Francisco, many of whom were gays who had been cast out of their homes and/or their jobs. Having decided to champion social justice for them, these ministers formed the Council on Religion and the Homosexual in December 1964.

Over the next few years, homophile organizations, often using the model of the Council, appeared elsewhere. In Ottawa, the fledgling homophile group, the Committee of Social Hygiene, began talks in February of 1965 with local clergy to "form some type of organization to help homosexuals with their spiritual problems . . . the group felt that it would be best to examine homosexuality generally including sociological, psychological, and economic standpoints."² In May, the Canadian Council on Religion and the Homosexual was formed to carry out this mandate, and the committee was dissolved.

The Council did not last long, but its non-denominational nature was reflected later in other organizations. The oldest in Canada is the Council on Homosexuality and Religion, founded in 1976 in Winnipeg. It is a voice and a forum for over twenty lesbian/gay and gay-positive religious and social service agencies, one of them Buddhist. Others include the Christian Lesbian Action Support and Study Group in Vancouver, the Interfaith Network of Toronto, and Sparrow in Halifax.³ Similar organizations exist overseas.⁴

Specialized services to assist those wishing to remain active in religious denominations are provided by a number of organizations, especially Roman Catholic ones. The Communications Ministry, based in New York City, has for many years offered support for gay Roman Catholic clergy and church members. Still others promote dialogue and offer resources both to heterosexuals and to homosexuals. The New Ways Ministry, for example, is a service of reconciliation and social justice for Roman Catholic lesbian and gay people, their families, friends, and the larger Roman Catholic community. A similar service for the Brethren and Mennonites in the United States, Canada, and abroad is provided by the Brethren/Mennonite Council for Lesbian and Gay Concerns.

By far the most numerous organizations are the lesbian/gay groups. They are sometimes established with, but most often without, the blessing of the denomination concerned. Each group forms a chapter that may be part of a national association, a regional section of an "international" [usually American] one or, very occasionally, the only one of its kind. Most are small, often having no more than fifteen or twenty active members in any one group, but nearly all produce newsletters.

The first to appear, early in 1969, was the Roman Catholic group, Dignity, which now has over 100 chapters. Dignity Canada Dignité is a region within Dignity Incorporated, and has chapters in Toronto (1974), Calgary, Edmonton, Lethbridge, Saskatchewan, Winnipeg, and Montreal.

Dignity's principal challenge has been the Pope's strong position on homosexuality, especially in the United States where the many liberal bishops and priests are regarded with suspicion in Rome. American bishops, some under intense pressure, have forced more than a score of chapters out of the dioceses where they met and worshipped; this example is now being followed in Toronto. One result is that many members of Dignity have given up and left for other groups, such as MCC, where they are made to feel welcome.

Those lesbian and gay Roman Catholic groups not so closely tied to matters of doctrine have fared rather better than Dignity. One is the Conference of Catholic Lesbians which grew out of a retreat sponsored by the New Ways Ministry in 1981. While it began as a conference the following year, it has since blossomed into "an international organization for women who recognize the importance of the Catholic tradition in shaping their lives, and who seek to develop a spiritual life which enhances and affirms their lesbian identity".⁵

Nearly all the other major denominations, which are over-whelmingly Protestant, now have lesbian/gay chapters. Integrity, the Anglican/Episcopalian group, has chapters across the United States and Canada. Integrity and Dignity sometimes share facilities, and members often move back and forth. They also share some doctrinal challenges. Integrity has found its church reluctant to bless same-sex marriages, and the ordination of homosexuals is almost as thorny an issue as in the United Church.⁶

Relations between the strongly evangelical denominations and their chapters are understandably bad. S.D.A. Kinship International emphasizes it has no affiliation with the Seventh Day Adventist Church in which gays and lesbians "are made to feel condemned and unwelcome." Independence from the Church of the Latter-day Saints is also emphasized by Affirmation: Gay and Lesbian Mormons! As recently as 1977, a pioneering pamphlet on the Mormon attitude towards homosexuality had to be published anonymously to prevent the church from attempting to discredit it through character assassination.⁷

The moderately evangelical United Methodist Church in the United States has been a more welcoming church. Its lesbian/gay chapter, Affirmation, began a Reconciling Congregation Program in 1984, to identify those congregations that would allow all people to be involved in their churches. By mid-1989, it had been accepted by thirty-eight congregations and five conferences.⁸ Lutherans Concerned/North America has a similar programme, with forty-one congregations in the United States, but none in Canada. However, there is still potential for conflict within the Evangelical Lutheran Church over the issue of ordination of openly gay men and lesbians.⁹

Such ordinations will cause conflict for years to come, as the current controversy in the United Church has demonstrated. Its lesbian/gay group, Affirm, has played an active role even though it is relatively new (1982) and with only a half-dozen chapters. The need for Affirm is perhaps not as great as in other denominations, because lesbians and gays have long been active quite openly within the United Church and continue to feel welcome there.

Unitarian lesbians and gays have been fortunate in having one of the most supportive church organizations. Toronto's First Unitarian Congregation began discussing homosexuality in the 1960s and, with little fuss, created the Sub-Committee on Homophiles in January 1971.¹⁰ The Unitarian Universalist Gay Caucus was formed shortly afterwards, and in 1973 the Unitarian Universalist Association in Washington established an Office of Gay Concerns, the first denomination anywhere to do so.

The lesbian and gay chapters are overwhelmingly associated with Christian denominations, but Jewish gays and lesbians have also long been well represented across Canada. These include both groups such as Chutzpah in Toronto and Naches in Montreal, and a number of gay synagogues, such as Beth Sinchat Torah in Vancouver. In addition, some of the Reform congregations have gay outreach programmes.¹¹

In spite of the large number of chapters, many lesbians and gays feel that their spiritual needs cannot be met in the traditional denominations. Hope was provided in 1968 with the establishment of a lesbian/gay church. The Metropolitan Community Church, the first of the Universal Fellowship of such churches, was founded in Los Angeles by the Reverend Troy Perry. Since then it has spread across the United States, Canada, and to eleven other countries.

Homophobia presents special problems for lesbian and gay organizations looking for a home for their records. Should they turn files over to religious archives run by the denominations that condemn them? Or to government or university archives? Will the custodians of the records understand their context and be able to assess the historical, evidential, and other values of the documents in their care? Will they keep certain material that they find offensive personally or deeply critical of religious or other

institutions? Will they preserve the buttons, banners, T-shirts and other artifacts that archives are traditionally reluctant to retain, but which document an important element of the lesbian/gay community's expression of itself?

Or should the material be deposited in a "community archives," always short of funds, usually run by volunteers not always aware of archival principles and procedures (but strong on enthusiasm and dedication), and probably lacking optimum storage facilities? Many lesbian and gay individuals and organizations have chosen the last option. While the donors are aware of the potential problems, they want their files to be used to the fullest possible extent in the context of the lesbian/gay community. They also want them in a place where they and other researchers will feel comfortable asking questions and exchanging information.

One consequence of the rise of the lesbian and gay rights movement, therefore, has been the creation of about forty archives, and even one museum,¹² to house material lesbians and gays do not want to deposit in "straight" institutions. The Canadian Gay Archives in Toronto is the second largest of these. The other Canadian archives are the Archives Gaies du Québec (Montreal), the Archives for the Protection of Gay History and Literature (Moncton), and the newly established Manitoba Lesbian/Gay Archive in Winnipeg. The Canadian Women's Movement Archives has holdings of lesbian/feminist material. Some records have also been deposited in the archives of the universities of British Columbia and Saskatchewan and in the provincial archives of Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Printed material may be found scattered through libraries across the country, though the access points often leave much to be desired.

This article is drawn largely from material housed in the Canadian Gay Archives. The most heavily used section of the archives comprises the 12,000 "vertical" files on individuals and organizations which have expressed opinions on both sides of the issue of homosexuality. These files, for the most part, contain brochures, fliers, notices, press releases, and occasionally minutes and reports which have been received by the archives over the years, apart from the official records of organizations and the personal records of individuals. They usually form the first level of reference for most users, and here is found the basic information on many of the groups mentioned in this article, especially those located outside of Canada.

The Canadian Gay Archives has acquired the records of many of the Canadian denominational groups and lesbian/gay denominations, and the personal records of individuals connected with them. These records are crucial to an understanding of how the groups are structured, the dynamics of inter-group relationships, and the roles played by committed lesbians and gay men and church officials. The records of the organizations usually contain the administrative correspondence, working files, reports, and other material a researcher might expect to find, sometimes in considerable volume.

But personal records are an equally valuable source of information, especially for the early years when the officers of organizations were, in effect, the custodians of the files associated with the positions they held. Hidden amongst the personal records are often welcome surprises. Some have especially valuable correspondence files, with letters from networks of correspondents around the world. Or they may contain valuable non-textual material in the form of tape recordings and film.

Complementing the vertical files and records is a voluminous amount of published material. Representative samplings and often complete runs of the newsletters of the

lesbian/gay religious groups throughout North America, and some from overseas, are on file. Over two hundred titles have been documented, with approximately half being represented in the Archives. Complementing these, usually with a contrasting viewpoint, are the periodicals produced by the churches and associated organizations. The researcher may also consult a wide range of periodical titles produced by organizations with no direct religious connection, along with many briefs, pamphlets, reports, and books from within Canada and outside it.

A growing collection of audio and video tapes records activities ranging from sermons and interviews to radio broadcasts, television programmes, and the proceedings of conferences. The sermons, in particular, are rare — they were recorded by people associated with what became MCC Toronto between 1971 and 1978 — and constitute the earliest aural documentaries of that organization. Perhaps the most significant of the conference proceedings are those for the second Conference for Catholic Lesbians (1983), mentioned earlier.

Further documentation is provided by photographs, posters, and artifacts, largely buttons, matchbook covers, and T-shirts. The last, while not traditionally acquired by archives, are, as has been noted, an important part of the record of the lesbian/gay community. It is time that the archival profession rethought its position on the acquisition of such material, especially where its preservation elsewhere is unlikely. The re-evaluation should also include the provision of funding for arrangement and description that now applies to the traditional forms of archival material.

Given the rather thorny relationship between the churches and the lesbian/gay community, it is not surprising that the latter should be concerned about the confidentiality of certain of their records deposited in an archives. It is therefore essential that conditions of access be established at the time of deposit. Of particular sensitivity have been membership lists, the minutes of meetings, and the files associated with special projects such as surveys. The lesbian/gay groups are well aware of the need to balance confidentiality with public access, so as much material as possible is left open. Publications such as newsletters and official reports are, of course, unrestricted. The restrictions are sometimes worded so that access can be granted without reference back to the donor group or individual. The usual practice, however, has been for the researcher to seek permission in writing from the donor. Any concerns that might arise can thus be settled in advance. Both the donor and the archives are reassured, and relations between the two do not become strained as a result of misunderstandings.

The emergence, over the past thirty years, of a publicly recognizable lesbian/gay community has had a wide-ranging impact on society. Established religions have long been targets of lesbian/gay activism and relationships between lesbians and gays and organized religions have often been difficult. Even the move towards greater acceptance of lesbians and gays by some denominations may not greatly improve relations for, as a number of respondents in one study pointed out, there is often

a gap between intention and action, proclamation and deed. Most irksome . . . was the apparent acceptance of a policy of inclusiveness . . . that in practice was not implemented. Some referred to tokenism, others to covert discrimination; all of these critics expressed some suspicion for hierarchy and the church's distance from routine practice.¹³

As suspicion and mistrust on both sides will not easily be eradicated, even with the best of intentions, and because the volume of material produced by lesbian and gay groups and individuals will continue to grow, the archival profession must be prepared to act in a positive manner to ensure that valuable records are not lost. While lesbian/gay archives perform a valuable service, they do not exist in all parts of Canada. Many lesbian and gays will continue to deposit their records in community archives, but there is also often a desire to retain records in the area in which they were created. If this is to be done, the concerns of potential donors must be addressed in a constructive manner. They must be reassured that the context of the records is understood, and their questions about preservation of the records, including public access, must be carefully discussed.

Archivists and their professional organizations should lobby governments to provide at least some core funding for small archives, including those without corporate sponsors. Funds should be made available to assist in the preservation of non-traditional archival material, where applicable. In this way the dedication of volunteer workers, who are often bring a detailed knowledge of events and issues in their community, will not be wasted.

Notes

- * All sources are from the Canadian Gay Archives, unless otherwise noted.
- 1 Bruce Hopkins, "God and Us and Cardinal John," *New York Native*, 350 (1.1.1990), p. 24.
- 2 Committee on Social Hygiene, memo of 22 April 1965; and Canadian Council of Religion and the Homosexual, bulletin of 28 May 1965.
- 3 CHR pamphlet, 1989; *Kinesis*, 15 September 1983, p. 35; *Xira!*, 10 November 1989, p. 6; *Advocate*, 12 November 1985, p. 31.
- 4 Centre de Christ Libérateur, circular of 25 August 1985.
- 5 Barbara Zonotti, ed., *A Faith of Own's Own: Explorations by Catholic Lesbians*, (Trumansburg, NY 1986), 5; Conference of Catholic Lesbians, CCL Conference 1990 notice.
- 6 *Integrity Inc. Directory, 1988; Observer*, 10 December 1989.
- 7 SDA Kinship International, news release, July 1986; *Affinity*, 12, 6 (June 1989), p. 4.
- 8 *Affirmation Newsletter*, Summer 1989, pp. 1, 3-4; *Concord*, 1988, 2, p. 2.
- 9 *Bondings*, 12, 1 (Fall 1989), p. 5.
- 10 Elgin Blair Papers, 84-011/01: Minutes of the Social Action Committee, 24.1.71.
- 11 Each of these is represented in the Canadian Gay Archives' vertical files.
- 12 Thirty-four completed surveys for Alan V. Miller, comp., *Directory of the International Association of Lesbian and Gay Archives and Libraries*, (Toronto, 1987). The National Museum of Lesbian and Gay History was established in New York City in November 1988.
- 13 Claire B. Fischer, "Bonding and Choice: Values and Identity Among Lesbian and Gay Religious Leaders," *Journal of Homosexuality*, 18, 3/4 (1989/90), p. 166.