

Appreciating Difference

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, August 20, 2003

I was raised Christian fundamentalist, in an influential Southern Baptist church. My first date was to the church Sweetheart Banquet, with Tony, who, like several of my church friends, now is gay.

In the decades since I dutifully memorized hundreds of Bible verses about God's love and our responsibility to others, I've watched the church of my childhood finally open its doors to racial minorities but remain fiery in its rejection of homosexuality. Religious zeal that could have been going into ministry for the poor and oppressed has been channeled instead into condemnation of people whose sexual orientation differs from the majority. Ironically, Jesus, who associated with outcast women, reached out to scorned tax collectors, and laid his hands on lepers, is now invoked in a campaign against people whose great "sin" is defined by whom they love.

Despite recent legal, religious and political skirmishes, a mainstream acceptance of gay rights is emerging in the U.S. At question are multiple issues. Are gay people entitled to basic civil rights? Should gay couples have the same benefits (shared property, adoption rights, insurance) as heterosexual couples who are married? Can those rights be protected by "civil union" contracts (as in Vermont)? Is a religious marriage ceremony necessary, or even possible, for a same sex couple?

From the confirmation this month of an openly gay bishop by the Episcopal Church, to the recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling that struck down sodomy laws, the ground is shifting. But the shift isn't lessening the resolve of opponents; in fact, it may spawn a backlash.

Before the Supreme Court ruling, opposition to gay marriage had dropped significantly, according to the Pew Research Center. In this year's poll, 53 percent of those surveyed said they opposed it, down from 65 percent in 1996. But a survey just after the court decision shows opposition of same-sex marriage increasing.

Some of the harshest criticism comes from the religious right, the core of President Bush's support. This wing of the Republican Party fears that the Supreme Court ruling (Lawrence et al. v. Texas) will lead to homosexual marriage. Bush seems to want to hedge the issue, saying that marriage "is between a man and a woman," while admitting, "we're all sinners." The president can't afford to alienate "swing"

voters, but Republican Party leaders-now calling for a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage-just might.

The issue is toxic for the Democrat Party, too. Most of the announced presidential candidates oppose gay marriage but support same-sex civil unions. But there's a gap between them and their constituency. Slightly less than half of Democratic voters supported civil unions before the high court ruling; in a telling reaction, a majority-57 percent-now opposes them, according to a New York Times/CBS poll in July.

The brouhaha over homosexuality is raging within the Episcopal Church, due to its affirmation of same-sex "blessing ceremonies" and the confirmation of the Rev. Gene Robinson. But what critics condemn, supporters cite as a testament to Robinson's integrity: he's been in a relationship with the same male partner for 13 years.

Doubters say Robinson's confirmation will drive a wedge between congregates. That's a tired argument. In fact, the schism over his confirmation echoes the ferocious battle of 1976 over the ordination of women. Opponents then proffered dire predictions of a church in breach of the Bible, forever ruined. But women have assumed leadership roles, providing guidance and healing to the flocks.

A lasting union between two people in love, regardless of their sexual orientation, needs to be enshrined not only in legal codes, but also, if they wish, in religious blessings. Marriage for gay or heterosexual couples creates stability and financial security, providing community support for them and their children. If we oppose promiscuity, we should support marriage.

Courts in Ontario, Canada have changed the definition of marriage from a union between a man and a woman to a union between two people. Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien plans to push for the legalization of same-sex marriage throughout the entire country. Americans may not be ready for that step, but at least we have a model.

In the 60s, gay activists asked others to "come out of the closet." As a result, most Americans today understand the struggle over homosexual rights as being about protecting essential freedoms and embracing difference, and not just about abstract principles. Our acceptance is of our brother, our neighbor, our daughter, our pastor-or even our first date to the Sweetheart Banquet at First Baptist Church.