

Evangelical church opens doors fully to gays

By ERIC GORSKI, AP Religion Writer *Eric Gorski, AP Religion Writer* — DECEMBER 19 2009

DENVER — The auditorium lights turned low, the service begins with the familiar rhythms of church: children singing, hugs and handshakes of greeting, a plea for donations to fix the boiler.

Then the 55-year-old pastor with spiked gray hair and blue jeans launches into his weekly welcome, a poem-like litany that includes the line "queer or straight here, there's no hate here."

The Rev. Mark Tidd initially used the word "gay." But he changed it to "queer" because it's the preferred term of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people invited to participate fully at Highlands Church.

Tidd is an outlaw pastor of sorts. His community, less than a year old, is an evangelical Christian church guided both by the Apostle's Creed and the belief that gay people can embrace their sexual orientation as God-given and seek fulfillment in committed same-sex relationships.

Disagreements over [homosexuality and the Bible](#) have divided mainline Protestant churches for years. In evangelical churches, though, the majority view has held firm — the Bible clearly condemns homosexual acts. The common refrain at evangelical churches: "love the sinner, hate the sin."

But with younger evangelicals and broader society showing greater acceptance of homosexuality, many evangelical churches can expect, at the least, a deeper exploration of the issue.

"Highlands Church represents a breakout position, where you have a gay-affirming stance that moves beyond the traditional kind of liberal-conservative divide," said Mark Achtemeier, an associate professor at [University of Dubuque Theological Seminary](#), which is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). "I'm finding lots of moderate conservatives just think there's something wrong with a default position of excluding gays from the life of the church."

David Dockery, president of [Union University](#), a Southern Baptist school in Jackson, Tenn., believes Highlands is — and is likely to remain — outside of the mainstream of evangelical churches.

"I don't think it can be taken for granted anymore that the traditional evangelical view will be adopted by the coming generations given the changes and shifts in our culture," Dockery said.

That makes it all the more important, he says, for evangelical leaders to clearly teach the traditional views on homosexuality.

The people of Highlands Church — those who stood with their renegade pastor and others who left feeling betrayed — have learned that taking an uncommon road comes at a cost.

Craig Ellsworth grew up in an [Assemblies of God church](#) and has spent most of his life in evangelical churches. He was an administrative pastor at a large church for 10 years.

But because Ellsworth is gay, he said he felt he could never fully be himself. While straight co-workers were encouraged to date and find partners, Ellsworth would risk losing his job if he did.

"There was what I was told in churches, and there was hearing God and knowing what I believe is true of God," said Ellsworth, 48, who is not in a relationship. "The two didn't really line up."

Ellsworth started attending Highlands Church last summer.

"I love being in a faith community that is loving and being Christlike to others without an agenda and without labels," said Ellsworth.

Tidd said Highlands is not a one-issue church but one committed to social justice. He describes it as "radically inclusive but still rooted in the essentials of the Gospel." The church discourages promiscuity and encourages healthy lifelong relationships.

Tidd said he supports gay marriage and would perform same-sex blessings if asked. A gay man in a committed relationship sits on the church's board of trustees.

"Our position is not one of lenience, but a matter of justice," said Tidd, a married father of five. "It's not that we don't acknowledge the reality of sin. It's not a sin to be gay or act in accordance with your nature."

Tidd was raised a nominal Catholic in Boulder, Colo. He had a born-again Christian experience and joined the Jesus movement of the 1960s, which blended hippie culture and Christianity. Eventually Tidd was ordained in the [Christian Reformed Church](#) and shared its conservative position of homosexuality.

His change of heart began when, as a pastor in Boulder, a distraught couple sought his counsel when their young daughter began identifying as a boy — introducing Tidd to the transgender issue.

He began to question applying the "plain meaning" of ancient Biblical text to here-and-now homosexuality. The Bible, read literally, suggests the earth is flat and could be used to justify slavery, he said.

He accepted the Biblical interpretation of other gay-affirming Christians: that verses condemning homosexual behavior refer to idolatrous pagan worship or violence.

"We reach an understanding of the Bible not just by studying God's word, but by studying his world," Tidd said. "If you think he's the author of both, they both inform each other."

If evangelicals can disagree about end-times theology and baptism methods and still be considered authentic Christians, he thought, why can't the same tent hold disagreements about homosexuality?

Tidd took his beliefs in 2006 to a job as a pastor at Denver's Pathways Church, an urban evangelical congregation that prides itself as a safe place to ask questions. Tidd said he didn't hide his views from church leaders but didn't air them at length as a pastor, either; homosexuality was never a central issue for the church.

But behind the scenes, the societal debate over homosexuality and Pathways' welcoming posture had forced its hand. Ed Briscoe, a member of Pathways' board of elders, said leaders felt they needed guidance on whether gay and lesbian members not living in celibacy should be allowed in church leadership.

A church elder produced a nine-page case for the traditional evangelical stance. While making clear the church does not consider homosexuality "the worst sin or the most evil practice," the statement says the Bible uniformly condemns homosexual relationships and only permits sex between a man and woman united in marriage. "God made male and female to fit together," it says, and homosexual acts violate God's intent.

The door at Pathways would remain open to gays and lesbians. But with leadership had to come celibacy.

There is disagreement about how the issue played out as Tidd was to launch Highlands as a Pathways satellite in a gentrifying Denver neighborhood last year. Tidd said he was told his stance on homosexuality would not be a problem, but Briscoe said it wasn't clear what Tidd intended for the new site.

Last summer, the Pathways statement on homosexuality, which had not been intended for general distribution, began circulating among church members. Tidd, who said he had only recently learned of the paper, began fielding questions about where he stood. Some Pathways members made it known they would stop donating if Tidd remained on staff, he said.

So Tidd and Pathways parted ways. Highlands become a stand-alone church no longer under Pathways' authority and Tidd announced it would be open and affirming to LGBT people.

Tidd said that in light of the decision, he also plans to give up his Christian Reformed Church ministerial credentials because his position conflicts with the denomination's.

The exodus from Highlands began as the reason for the break became known. Tidd said over two months, the church lost half its attendance and two-thirds of its financial support.

Jim and Chris Stuhr, who were members of Highlands' leadership team, said they were initially troubled after learning of Tidd's views and set out to research a subject they didn't know well.

Their conclusion — that the Bible strictly prohibits the practice of homosexuality — led to what the couple called a heart-wrenching decision to leave a church they had such hopes for.

"I have read the explanations and Biblical arguments of those who promote the gay lifestyle as acceptable in the Bible and it seems to me that they are an exercise in hermeneutical gymnastics," Jim Stuhr said.

At the same time, the church's position began to attract new members and strengthened the resolve of existing ones like Maura Weiler and Chad DiPrince, a married couple from the neighborhood.

"We have no real reason to champion this thing, other than we think it's right," said DiPrince, a 34-year-old Web developer and artist. "I just didn't feel God would tell a person to deny a big part of who they are and to keep it a secret."

For others, it's not black and white. Briscoe, the Pathways elder, said he and his wife are still weighing where they stand and worship at both Highlands and Pathways.

"I think people are going to reopen their Bible and look at it and not assume anymore," Briscoe said, adding that he thinks the Highlands position can be held by "mature, faithful, Bible-believing people."

The two churches maintain a relationship — their members will head to New Orleans over spring break to work on a housing rehabilitation project, and other joint service projects are planned.

Just over a month ago, 81 adults showed up for 10 a.m. services at Highlands Church. Tidd started draping white ribbon over the back rows so people would sit together up front.

Last Sunday, there was a record crowd of 220. The auditorium was twinkling with Christmas lights. And four couples carried babies to the front of the church for Tidd to bless.

http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/us_rel_gay_affirming_church