

CHAPTER 2

"God Doesn't Intend for Christians to Act This Way, But That's part of Being Human."

Political consciousness cannot exist in a vacuum. Inevitably, it impinges upon other mental processes. As homosexuals became proud of their sexuality and discovered political activism, it was only a question of time before many, in the face of traditional religious teachings, would begin to feel uncomfortable in the pew of their local mainline church. To the mainline denominations, the Bible spoke quite clearly on the subject of homosexuality. It was against the word of God. Homosexuals, then, had three choices: to stay within the church and attempt to reconcile its teachings with their sexuality, to leave the church and forsake the spiritual altogether or, finally, to leave and create viable alternatives. In the city of Houston, they did all three.

The Church's traditional thought on the question of homosexuality was generally based on seven essential scriptural passages, four from the Old Testament and three from the New Testament.¹ Intellectually, the first revisionist study of the scriptures came with

Derrick Sherwin Bailey's book, Homosexuality and the Western Christian Tradition (1955), which analyzed the pertinent biblical texts without doctrinal bias. However, it was not until the seventies that the debate flourished, most provocatively with John J. McNeil's, The Church and the Homosexual (1976) and Norman Pittenger's, Homosexuals and the Bible (1977). The traditional understandings were thoroughly questioned by scholars and new interpretations offered in their place. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah did not concern homosexuality but hospitality. They argued that the law of Leviticus, "Thou shalt not lie with a man as thou would with a woman", was, today, irrelevant and out of date, that many of the scriptures had suffered in translation from the Greek and Hebrew and that the translators themselves had written in their own morality, that homosexuality was only a sin when indulged in by those who were by nature heterosexual. Finally, many progressive theologians would point to the fact that Jesus Christ never spoke on the matter.² Clearly the arguments were many but the mainline denominations were not to be easily convinced and their general conferences in the mid-seventies bore witness to that.

On October 16, 1968, twelve people answered an advertisement in the Los Angeles Advocate and attended the first service of what was to be the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches.³ The

service was led by the Reverend Troy Perry. Troy Perry was born in Tallahassee, Florida, on July 27, 1940, and as a child spent much of his time in devout Baptist and pentecostal circles. He described himself as a "religious fanatic".⁴ He shunned the traditional pleasures of youth, going to the movies, playing cards and watching television. He quit high school in his junior year and in 1958 married the daughter of the pastor of a local Church of God, "I was always interested in pastors' daughters because I thought they would make good preachers' wives."⁵ After he had attended the Midwest Bible College and the Moody Bible Institute, they ministered small Pentecostal churches, eventually moving to Santa Ana, California. Here, doubts began to undermine his theology, climaxing with the realisation that he was a homosexual. He confronted his district elder with his dilemma. The elder responded, "Have you molested some little boy in our Sunday School?"⁶ Immediately, Perry had become the victim of one of homosexuality's most enduring myths. Next, on the orders of his bishop, he stood up and told his congregation that he had failed the Lord. Perry and his wife separated and eventually divorced. After a stint in the army, he moved to Los Angeles, working for Sears. Unhappy and spurned by his first male lover, Perry attempted suicide. He was discovered and rushed to the hospital. It was his faith that rescued him.

The first service was partly in response to the agony of a friend who had been unjustly arrested by the Los Angeles police during a raid on a homosexual bar. The next morning, Perry bailed his friend out of jail. His friend, despondent, remarked that nobody liked a homosexual. Perry was not so sure, "even if people don't, I'm still convinced that God does." His companion was not convinced, "God doesn't care about me. I even went to my minister, and I told him I was a homosexual. Do you know what he told me? He said that I couldn't be a homosexual and a Christian too."⁷ Perry experienced the turmoil of his friend's spirit and later knelt to pray, "All right, God, if it's Your will, if you want to see a church started as an outreach into our community, you just let me know when." And that still small voice in mind's ear just let me know - now."⁸

Of the twelve people attending the first service, nine were Perry's friends who had come to support him in his slightly unusual venture. Only three had answered the advertisement proper. However, three years later, the Metropolitan Community Church of Los Angeles had acquired its own building. On March 7, 1971, it was dedicated. 1012 people attended. Governor Ronald Reagan declined an invitation due to a prior engagement.⁹ Clearly, from the church's rapid growth, Perry was satisfying a basic need for homosexuals. He had created a viable alternative to the mainline denominations. Houston homosexuals would

follow four years later.

The first tentative steps towards creating a Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) in Houston began in 1971-1972. There were several efforts to form a study group, but they were unsuccessful until December, 1972, when meetings began on a regular basis at the home of Arnold Lawson. Considering the swift expansion of the city, there had to be need. Reverend Joseph Anthony, a MCC missionary to the city, remarked, "the Gays in Houston need a church because there are no active church organizations accepting gays."¹⁰

Under the close supervision of Exhorter Robert Miller from MCC-Dallas, the study group outgrew the private apartment and moved into a rundown storefront on Waugh Drive which was quickly converted into a house of worship. In February, 1974, the building was dedicated. Four months later, the study group submitted the necessary twenty five signatures to the district authorities and was granted mission status.¹¹ With this, the fledgling congregation gained a little more autonomy and moved closer to the eventual goal, full status.

Attendance increased, well above the thirty five active members that were necessary to petition for chartering. In February, 1975, forty three people submitted that petition to the District Board of Home Missions, a committee made up of representatives from the district churches. In late March, the Board of Elders granted the charter and

the church assumed total independence. Charter Sunday was set for April 20, 1975, and the congregation called the Reverend Robert M. Falls to be the first pastor.¹² Reverend Falls was to serve until July 1, 1976, aided by the Reverend Robert Miller. By the end of 1975 the church had shown remarkable growth. The membership numbered 132.¹³

Surprisingly, the Metropolitan Community Church of the Resurrection, the permanent name chosen for the church in late 1974, was relatively late in coming into being, considering the size of Houston and its growing homosexual population. In 1971, eighteen congregations had sent representatives to the second General Conference of MCC, held in Los Angeles. The following year, more than forty congregations sent delegates and in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1973, sixty congregations met. By 1974, MCC existed in Toronto and Ottawa, Canada, and London, England.¹⁴ Houston's slow start can no doubt be explained by the traditionally conservative nature of the city which did not change until the mid-seventies when the increasing influx of persons in search of the 'good life' in 'boom town' began to make their presence felt. The majority came from the more progressive areas of the United States. And yet the leading figures in MCC-Houston were Texans.

In addition, the national climate of religious debate in 1975 did not appear conducive to the establishment of a homosexual church in Houston. The position of the homosexual vis-a-vis the mainline churches

had become a controversial topic for discussion within the denominational hierarchies. The issue had first surfaced in 1972 when the Golden Gate Association of the United Church of Christ had ordained a self-declared homosexual, William R. Johnson. In April, 1975, the same month in which MCC-Houston held its first service as a full status church, the Texas Methodist published the result of a poll of its readers. Of 8,600 people questioned, 95% were against the ordination of homosexuals and 94% disapproved of the homosexual lifestyle.¹⁵

Earlier that month, the Central Texas Annual Conference Council on Ministries had also opposed the ordination of homosexuals in the United Methodist Church, opposed employment of them within the church and stated that no funds would be allocated to homosexual caucuses.¹⁶

The homosexuality question was a primary topic of debate at the United Methodist Churches' General Conference, the next year, in Portland, Oregon. The 1972 statement, "that the Church does not condone the practice of homosexuality" was reaffirmed although, encouragingly, General Conference did vote down a specific proposal that prohibited the ordination of homosexuals.¹⁷ In addition, the Methodists encouraged the formation of study groups by local churches to investigate the problem, although, again, no church funds were to be made available.¹⁸

In February, 1976, the Annual Convention of the Episcopal Diocese

of Texas voted to prohibit homosexuals from holding office. Reverend Sidney Gervais, author of the resolution and the Rector of the Ascension Church on Westheimer commented, "We need to minister to them, not ordain them."¹⁹ The Episcopal Church had no existing law prohibiting homosexuals from holding office and, in fact, the convention's decision could be seen as a reaction to the recent appointment of a lesbian to a deacon's position by the Bishop of New York.

In late 1976, the United Pentecostal Church International meeting in Anaheim, California, condemned homosexuality in addition to abortion and the use of cosmetics.²⁰ That summer, in Norfolk, Virginia, the 119th Annual Southern Baptist Convention, representing the largest protestant denomination in the United States, 12.7 million people, heartily approved a resolution, urging 32,000 congregations to refuse ordination.²¹ The resolution affirmed the Baptist commitment, "to the biblical truth, regarding the practice of homosexuality as a sin."²² Although the Convention recognized each church's autonomy it called for them, "not to afford the practice of homosexuality any degree of approval through ordination, employment, or other designations of a normal lifestyle."²³ The following year, in Kansas City, the Baptists would endorse the antics of Anita Bryant.²⁴

The Presbyterian Church took a more careful approach to the issue in Baltimore in 1976, the General Assembly, in response to the New York

Presbytery's request for guidelines, recommended a major study and concluded that there could be no ordination of homosexuals at that time in light of traditional views. The question was then deferred to the 1978 General Assembly.²⁵ In 1977 in Philadelphia, a resolution to halt the study, led by Huntsville, Alabama, and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, failed by a margin of 381-278.²⁶ A year later in San Diego, the United Presbyterian Church decided to welcome into the ministry, celibate homosexuals or homosexuals seeking to become heterosexuals. The resolution to ordain practicing homosexuals was narrowly defeated.²⁷

The exception to the rule proved to be the Unitarians who had by 1974 passed resolutions supporting civil rights for homosexuals and their integration into the church. But, of course, the Unitarians were not Christians, believing that Jesus Christ was a prophet and not the son of God. Consequently, the Bible and the pertinent scriptures were not as central to their theology, allowing the Unitarians to build up a tradition of progressivism.

To an extent the attitude a denomination adopted toward the question of homosexuality could be explained by the socio-economic makeup of its congregation. Thus, the Baptist Church, which generally appealed to blue collar workers and the lesser educated, remained extremely condemnatory whereas the Lutheran and Presbyterian Church with

predominantly middle class, better educated congregations took a more liberal view. Indeed, the Lutherans have had a history of civil disobedience. The Unitarians, with their intellectual appeal, naturally, have approached the issue with the greatest understanding. Clearly education is important in destroying myths and misconceptions.²⁸

The national debate on the ordination of homosexuals and their place within the churches, seemed to have little affected the growth of MCC-Houston. In fact, the Reverend Robert Falls had been a victim of that debate. He had studied at a Benedictine abbey and had been asked to drop out of seminary by his superiors two weeks before ordination on the basis of his homosexuality. Despite the resignation of Reverend Falls in July, 1976, by the end of the year the congregation had grown to 156, an increase of 24 and income had risen from \$10,043 to \$28,596, a startling jump of 184%.²⁹ In addition, the Church had outgrown the building on Waugh Drive and had in November, 1975, relocated to a larger building on Jo Annie Street. It appeared a classic case. Persecution and rejection had strengthened the resolve of the Christian homosexuals.

After a period of six months, in which Exhorter Rita Wanstrom acted as service coordinator, Reverend Jeri Ann Harvey was called to be the second pastor of MCC-Houston, serving from January 9, 1977, to April 23,

1978.³⁰ Again, 1977 saw swift growth. By the end of the year, the congregation had swelled to 262, a growth of 106 persons.³¹ In part, the expansion can be explained by the anti-homosexual campaign carried out by Anita Bryant and her appearance in Houston as a guest of the State Bar of Texas. Many homosexuals felt that they had to respond to the potential threat she offered and joining an overtly homosexual organization was one reaction. Reverend Harvey acknowledged that the growth of her congregation was due to the Dade County referendum.³²

Yet, despite the Anita Bryant crusade, the Church was becoming increasingly viable and serving a vital function in the homosexual community. In turn, the community itself had matured enough to support a ministry, a key ingredient in the formation of community identity. Because the mainline church remained constricted by its dogma, MCC-Houston provided a religious alternative to homosexuals who felt hurt or alienated by the traditional interpretations of the key scriptures. It was a place to worship with mental ease and spiritual comfort.

With its success, the Church was faced with the problem of long term aim. Did MCC-Houston stand for integration or separation? Would MCC-Houston eventually fade away when the mainline churches had been re-educated, had accepted homosexuals and altered their teachings accordingly? Or was MCC-Houston another denomination, ready to take on

its role in the market place of souls? The answer was simple. MCC-Houston felt it had a permanent position to maintain. Reverend Dee Lamb, the present assistant pastor, commented, "We see ourselves as just one more denomination."³³ Philip Slusser, student clergy, felt that even if homosexuals were accepted within the mainline church, MCC-Houston still could maintain a positive function as people come together on the basis of common interest even in worship.³⁴

But not everyone was content with MCC-Houston and, ironically, it was its size that caused many of the dissatisfactions. Jeanne Leggett who had moved to Houston in early 1977, left MCC-Houston after only three months as student clergy, a position she held with MCC-Fort Worth. In Fort Worth, she had been part of the New Freedom Evangelistic Team which visited Metropolitan Community Churches, especially the small and isolated, to conduct revivals and to teach the Bible. Leggett objected to the narrow theological focus of MCC-Houston, basically confined to "God loves the homosexual."³⁵ She believed that this emphasis led to too much time being allocated to the political and social. In January, 1978, Leggett was an integral part in the formation of a Bible study group which eventually would become the basis of the Church of Christian Faith. The Church was chartered by the state of Texas in the spring of 1979 and Leggett became the pastor.

That the alternative religious movement catering to homosexuals in

Houston would not, indeed could not remain monolithic, was inevitable. There were too many people looking to identify spiritually with what they had been used to, with what they had grown up. Presbyterians wanted an essentially presbyterian service. Other denominations, the Baptists, the Catholics, the pentecostals, the Lutherans, the Episcopalians, the Jews looked for much the same alternatives. MCC-Houston with its umbrella theology tried to include within its services parts of other denominational services so that everybody would have at least something with which to identify. Naturally, there was a limit to which the Church could go and inevitably, not everyone was satisfied. The end result of this dissatisfaction was the establishment of homosexual support groups on denominational lines.

The roots of 'Dignity', the Catholic support group, are firmly buried in 1970. A chapter of 'Integrity', the Episcopalian support group, was formed in Houston in 1976. A year later, a chapter of 'Lutherans Concerned For Gays' was started up. In 1979, homosexual members of Houston area Churches of Christ created 'A Cappella Chorus'. That same year, homosexual Unitarians formed a caucus that was to operate within the First Unitarian Church on Fannin Street. The Methodists established their own support group, the Wesleyan Fellowship, but much of its purpose was unintentionally undermined by the Methodist bishop of Houston, Bishop Crutchfield, who in 1978 appointed the

Reverend Pogue to the ministry of the Bering Memorial Church on Harold Street in the heart of Montrose. The Church was to have a specific homosexual outreach. Yet, in terms of numbers, MCC-Houston was to remain and does still remain the largest homosexual religious organization. Ironically it was MCC-Houston's size that would lead to friction and disagreement in the future.³⁶

In April, 1978, Reverend Jeri Ann Harvey left MCC-Houston to become pastor of MCC-Los Angeles. Ms. Annette Beall served as Worship Coordinator until Reverend Howard Wells was appointed Interim pastor until the end of the year. Reverend Wells had been a primary moving force in the early years of the Metropolitan Community Church, establishing the second congregation in the city of San Francisco. He continued to be a vital force behind the movement, organizing both MCC-New York City and MCC-Brooklyn. He was the first openly homosexual MCC affiliated student to graduate from the Union Theological Seminary, New York. Later, he became pastor of MCC-Atlanta.³⁷

Despite the turnover of ministers and a period of six months when the Church had no pastor per se, growth continued unabated. By the end of 1978, the congregation had swelled to 315. Income, too, had risen, although not substantially, from \$46,485 to \$51,854.³⁸ MCC-Houston's appeal remained so strong that, once again, the flourishing congregation had outgrown its premises. A new location was

sought. In early 1979, the Church purchased a building owned by the Tabernacle Baptist Church on Decatur Street, one block south of Washington Avenue in the Heights. The new premises seated over five hundred and its first pastor was Reverend Charles Larsen who had been called by the congregation in January, 1979. The Church, today, remains at the same location and the Reverend Larsen remains the pastor.³⁹

By 1982, the congregation had increased to 551 from the 1978 figure of 315. Income in 1982 had risen from \$51,854 in 1978 to \$138,111.⁴⁰ The growth had been sustained into the eighties. More interestingly, an estimated breakdown of age group makeup of the Church membership in 1982 revealed that the majority of the congregation was between the ages of 35 and 49, 353 in all, and that only 120 were between the ages of 19 and 34. The Church appeared to appeal to middle-aged homosexuals.⁴¹ Joseph Harry and William B. Devall had suggested in their book, The Social Organization of Gay Males (1978) that the homosexual 'ghetto' seemed to be age-selected. Based on the Castro/Market Street 'ghetto' in San Francisco, they found the median age to be roughly thirty. Few of the residents were in their early twenties and even fewer in their sixties or seventies. Perhaps, then, the Church was one middle-aged alternative to the fast lane life of the ghetto.⁴²

Meanwhile, the Bible study group set up in January, 1978, with the

help of Jeanne Leggett, had flourished. In January, 1979, that Bible study group became the Church of Christian Faith. With no real capital, they rented a warehouse on 34th Street in the Heights, "trusting that God's will would be done."⁴³ The response was heartening. "The Church's first year of growth was dramatic in that everybody more than willingly donated their time, talents and tithes."⁴⁴

In the course of the year, the Church of Christian Faith was incorporated by the state and its membership tripled from the original 7 to 20. That same year, the Church hosted a national conference of independent churches and contemplated a move to larger premises. In 1980, the Church of Christian Faith relocated into the heart of the homosexual community at 413 Westheimer, increasing, to a great degree, its visibility. "It was like a new beginning! Again everyone was generous with their time and talents, as we converted a run-down store-front building."⁴⁵

Yet, the new location had its drawbacks too. Being on Westheimer, the Church became an obvious magnet to the indigents who congregated in that area, seeking help and handouts. The Church had to decide whether its function was primarily to provide an alternative place of worship for homosexuals or to be a mission. There was never any doubt. The Church offered no help to the destitute but attempted to support the groups that did.⁴⁶

The Church of Christ Faith continued to grow, but not as dramatically as, and surely in the shadow of, MCC-Houston. Active membership, by the end of 1982, had reached roughly forty.⁴⁷

Despite this slow growth, the Church had established its own newsletter, The Sceptre, organized by the publications committee, one of four committees set up to deal with specific business. The newsletter was distributed throughout the community and put into the bars to proselytize. What growth there was, Jeanne Leggett attributed to the notion that, "people were excited about the learning" and, indeed, the Church continued to stress the "importance of personal study of scriptures."⁴⁸ The beginner's program consisted of intensive study of Genesis, Isaiah, Matthew, Acts, Romans and Revelations, which, in turn, acted as a solid foundation to further "deeper scriptural explorations."⁴⁹

The Church of Christian Faith was not without its critics. Like MCC-Houston, there were those who felt that something was wrong. The major criticism centered on the accusation that the Church's direction was too heavily influenced by radical feminist thought. Reverend Leggett dismissed the accusation. "This Church is not for everyone...Each of us (the other homosexual churches) has a unique outreach or a unique thing that people yearn for."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the congregation was generally 95% female, and, indeed, perhaps, the

conflict should be seen in light of more widespread differences that existed between male homosexuals and lesbians in the city of Houston at the time.

Despite the criticism, the Church of Christian Faith maintained cordial relations with MCC-Houston, but no such exchange existed with any of the mainline denominations. The Church's location encouraged a tendency to be ingrown, and, in addition, Reverend Leggett declared that with so many groups within the gay community, there was "less of a need to establish a rapport."⁵¹ And in 1982, two more groups joined that community, both with an MCC legacy. On June 20, 1982, the New Freedom Christian Church was founded and on September 4, 1982, the Community Gospel Centre opened its doors.

The New Freedom Christian Church was led by the Reverend Laura J. Sieczynski, who had resigned from her position as student clergy from MCC-Houston in May, 1982. The new Church's purpose was twofold, to provide an outreach to homosexuals and "to educate heterosexuals to understand homosexuals...that we are not a bunch of freaks."⁵² Reverend Sieczynski saw the need for the alternative church to teach the gospel because mainline denominations condemned homosexuality. "He came for all people. He did not come for a selected few."⁵³ She was not optimistic about future integration with the mainline churches although she would like to see it. Communication between the mainline

denominations and the New Freedom Christian Church was non-existent. The homosexual alternative was here to stay.⁵⁴

Reverend Sieczynski claimed that the idea to establish the Church was not hers, but that friends, urging her not to waste her talents and ability, had pressured her into the move. Financed solely through the generosity of friends and members, the Church experienced moderate growth. Full membership, today, stands at 14, although twenty five regularly attend the Sunday service. Four factors had contributed to the expansion, limited as it was, word of mouth, advertisements in the homosexual community papers, friends bringing in friends and bar sweeps.⁵⁵

Like MCC-Houston, the service employed is catch-all, so that the heterogeneous congregation can identify with some part of it and, yet, there is a heavier emphasis on ritual than that placed by MCC-Houston. Unlike other independent churches whose membership appeared to be limited by one specific characteristic, be it sex or denomination, Reverend Sieczynski claimed, "New Freedom had never been for just one group or one sex...(it is) for all people totally."⁵⁶ Nevertheless, the shadow of MCC-Houston looms large. Is it possible for the New Freedom Christian Church to survive?

There is no contact between MCC-Houston and the New Freedom Christian Church, Dee Lamb, assistant pastor of MCC-Houston readily

admitted, "there is a problem."⁵⁷ Much of the antagonism that exists between the two religious groups can be explained by Sieczynski's background. She had been a Catholic nun and was first involved in the homosexual alternative movement in Detroit as a member of MCC-Detroit. She left Detroit in 1979, supposedly for health reasons, seeking warmer climes. However, it is alleged that she had been in the center of conflict within MCC-Detroit and that the move, then, served not only a health purpose but a political one too. In the Houston Church, she remained as student clergy until May, 1982, when she suddenly resigned. Just prior to her resignation, Sieczynski had failed her proficiency examinations, a significant step to becoming a licensed minister. Nevertheless, she was given a vote of confidence by the Church board to continue for one more year as student clergy.⁵⁸

However, the examination results appear to have acted as a trigger in a deteriorating situation. Sieczynski had been experiencing growing unrest and frustration at the direction and organization of MCC-Houston. She claimed, "there was no way I could be loyal to that fellowship, (MCC-Houston), for a lot of reasons."⁵⁹ MCC-Houston had become too big, an official membership of 551 by the end of 1982. "Too many people were lost in the shuffle."⁶⁰ The focus of the Church had shifted from the religious to the political. MCC-Houston was suffering from a heavy dose of internal politics and personality differences. People

sought power, prestige and status and not souls. Dee Lamb, assistant pastor of MCC-Houston, acknowledged the accusation with reservations. "It's there...no more than anywhere else."⁶¹

That a certain degree of acrimony existed between the two Churches, there can be no doubt. Reverend Dee Lamb put it down to numbers. "There's jealousy because we are bigger than they are."⁶² She declared that MCC-Houston did not need to challenge the other churches for congregation. "We have no reason to compete with them. Our sanctuary is full every Sunday morning."⁶³ However, for the smaller independent churches, numbers are critical to survival. A bigger congregation means a bigger collection. Even between the smaller churches, all has not been well. There has been little communication between them and each appears to guard its congregation jealously. Reverend Sieczynski confirmed it and denied it. On the question of competition, she remarked, "For some, yeh, for me, no...I am into, 'are people's lives changed?'"⁶⁴

The Community Gospel Centre, which was established three months after the New Freedom Christian Church, was also not immune to antagonisms that existed in the homosexual religious community. Reverend Stickland, the pastor of the Centre, pointed out that they, as pentecostals, could not operate within MCC-Houston because it was too liturgical for the spiritual tastes of the more emotional and

spontaneous Pentecostals.⁶⁵ He had immediately identified MCC-Houston's most inherent weakness. Unless the heterogeneous congregation was willing to sacrifice some identification with their relative and diverse denominations, the Troy Perry notion of homosexual worship could disintegrate. Was being homosexual enough to maintain congregational cohesiveness? The Reverend Lamb had remarked on this dilemma. "You can't come into MCC and have a Pentecostal Church. You can't come into MCC and have a Church of Christ, you know, or any other. And for some people, it is very difficult. They have left their backgrounds and yet they want the same as they have left. And we have to give up part of what we left and we have to take on a greater understanding."⁶⁶ The homosexual had a choice, to remain within the mainline church and compromise a great deal, to join MCC-Houston or the New Freedom Christian Church or the Church of Christian Faith and compromise not quite so much, or if the homosexual was lucky and adhered to the Pentecostal faith, they could become part of the congregation at the Community Gospel Center.

The Community Gospel Center aimed its outreach at both homosexuals and heterosexuals who had difficulties worshipping within the mainline Pentecostal Church, whose practices remain strict, puritanical and doctrinaire. Reverend Stickland hoped to create a greater understanding with the mainline church which condemned not the homosexual but the

homosexual act. He believed that "God deals with people on the basis of spirituality, not sexuality" and thus sought "to reach people who have once been in line with the pentecostal experience."⁶⁷ It was a healing ministry.

Reverend Stickland had been in the ministry thirty four years and like others who had set up independent places of worship, he had had experience with MCC in Dallas and San Antonio. Within the Community Gospel Center, he watched over fairly explosive growth. "Not a week goes by where we don't gain 5 to 6 to 8 people."⁶⁸ The Center had started with five active members but by the close of 1982 numbered over sixty. However, like the other independent churches, the Community Gospel Center operates within the shadow of the bigger and more established MCC-Houston. Survival is a key issue.

In summary, the alternative churches, MCC-Houston, the Church of Christian Faith, the new Freedom Christian Church and the Community Gospel Center see themselves as viable alternatives to the mainline religious experience, alternatives to complement rather than alternatives to be integrated into the mainline denominations. They regard themselves as separate vital institutions with their own identities, servicing the spritual needs of the Houston homosexuals. Like their mainline counterparts in the city, there is a healthy sense of competition. Identities and congregations are closely guarded.

Animosity and antagonisms exist. Reverend Lamb of MCC-Houston summed up the whole situation in her own very Christian way. "God doesn't intend for Christians to act this way, but that's part of being human."⁶⁹

The mainline and alternative churches did not exhaust the choices open to the Houston homosexual in search of spiritual response. More energetic homosexuals had established several support groups on denominational lines that sought to reconcile the spiritually injured homosexual to his or her church. Their aim was to heal and educate, to integrate lost congregation not to separate.

Dignity was the first of these support groups, catering to alienated Catholic homosexuals. Its aims have been clearly stated.

Many recognize the need for a positive and realistic ministry to the gay Catholic. We are working within the Church for the development of its sexual theology and for the acceptance of gay men and women as full and equal members to provide a reconciliation with the Church. By encouraging a spiritual atmosphere via concerned support and sympathetic understanding we hope to facilitate that reconciliation.⁷⁰

Bob Heer, one of the leading figures in the present organization, confirmed the position of Dignity, emphasizing that the group wanted to "reconcile the gay Catholic with the structural Church."⁷¹ It was one very important step toward re-integration to encourage the victims of alienation to become active once again in their own parishes. "We (Dignity, Houston) do not intend this (the group) being a parish in itself."⁷²

Dignity had started in 1970 at Holy Rosary Church on Travis after the Sunday 11 a.m. mass. Basically a social organization, not only Catholics took part. In 1973, National Dignity held its first convention in Los Angeles and Dignity, Houston, not an official affiliate, had to change its name. A new name was chosen, Integrity. However, by 1974, a division within the membership had begun to surface. The Catholic participants wished to affiliate with the national organization, Dignity, while others, predominantly the non-Catholics, wanted to group to have a greater political thrust. The split was inevitable. In June, 1974, Dignity, Houston, was chartered by the national organization. Integrity continued as a political action caucus, a forerunner of the Gay Political Caucus. Integrity had another name change forced upon it when the homosexual Episcopalian support group chose the name, Integrity, for its national organization. To avoid confusion, Integrity became Interact, the oldest gay organization still functioning within the Houston homosexual community.⁷³

The new Dignity, Houston continued to meet at Holy Rosary Church under the sympathetic auspices of Father Mark Barron, who had organized the original group. However, ill-health soon forced Father Barron to resign from any active participation in Dignity and the clerical leadership fell to Father John Robbins, an assistant at St. Anne's Catholic Church located on Westheimer, just west of Shepherd. Father

Robbins, who had moved to Houston in 1973, had first heard of the special ministry in early 1974 and had supported Father Barron for his efforts on behalf of the homosexual community. On the request of Father Barron, Father Robbins took over the spiritual responsibilities of Dignity with the full support of his pastor, Father Bill Coughlin. Not surprisingly, there was fierce opposition to the presence of the Dignity group within the parish. However, the parish was fairly evenly polarized between the liberal element and conservative faction and Father John Robbins was not to be stopped. "I was a fairly formidable presence, and the pastor's support made it possible for us to hold weekly meetings for Mass."⁷⁴

Despite the opposition, Dignity continued to meet at St. Anne's, in which time Father Robbins had been transferred from Houston to Rochester, New York. Shortly after he left the city, Dignity's fate was sealed by the opening of a bar, "The Old Depository", across the street from the church. The bar catered to a homosexual clientele and proved to be exceedingly popular. The bar's patrons, in search of parking space, used the church parking lot. The inevitable clash occurred one night.

A member of the parish council, a real shrew, a John Birch type, was directing towing operations in front of the church when a fellow came running out of the Depository, and, seeing what was happening, exposed his impressive equipment, and chased her around the church grounds with it...Needless to

say, the Council was not amused, and both Dignity and the Depository fell victim to the reaction.⁷⁵

And yet that was not the whole story. There were other factors that led to Dignity's expulsion from St. Anne's. A Dignity advertisement in one of the Houston homosexual papers mentioned the name of the church. Again, St. Anne's was not amused. Perhaps, more importantly, St. Anne's heating system was sorely in need of repair and it is alleged one of the wealthier parishoners offered a rather large donation for its repair in exchange for Dignity's removal.⁷⁶

Dignity then held their Mass briefly in a small Byzantine chapel on the southern end of the University of St. Thomas' campus. However, within six weeks, the Director of the chapel had received a letter from the Chancellor and the University Board expressing the desire that they did not wish to see the group meeting on University property. Interestingly, at the time there was an overlap of membership between the board of the University and the St. Anne's parish Council.⁷⁷

Father Robbins, meanwhile, had returned to Houston for a brief visit and delivered at St. Anne's a controversial sermon for pentecost. He addressed directly the question of homosexuality. "pentecost is a feast of variety...St. Anne's, covering as it does, such a variety of areas - River Oaks to Montrose and everything between - really presents us with a variety of people and lifestyles."⁷⁸ He continued and

singled out homosexuals, talking of their role in St. Anne's and their professions. "What you may not know is that they are also doctors and lawyers, nuns and priests, bishops and popes, and even, I suspect, saints."⁷⁹ He confronted the congregation with the Dignity controversy and its conclusion, "this group was recently asked to move out of the parish much I'm sure to the delight of many. I, for one, was not delighted, and I see this sort of action in direct contradiction to what we celebrate today...As we go on now to pray for peace and unity, let us realize that a peace that is achieved by exclusion is no real peace."⁸⁰ Father Robbins received much positive response to his sermon but the negative reactions were directed at the pastor and even the Bishop of Galveston-Houston. Consequently, Father Robbins was forbidden ever to preach at St. Anne's again. Five years later, he left the priesthood.⁸¹

Despite two major setbacks, Dignity continued to function in private homes until Father Barron again offered the services of Holy Rosary. 1976 had not been a happy year for Dignity. 1977 was to be better. The group began to grow, expanding to nearly forty members. Some Catholic homosexuals, part of the influx of people into the city of Houston in search of jobs, had heard of or belonged to Dignity chapters in other cities and joined the Houston branch. Yet, above all, membership was increased by the blistering nationwide campaign of Anita

Bryant and especially, her victory in Dade County, Florida. Her visit to Houston precipitated massive response from the homosexual community and Dignity, along with other homosexual organizations felt the reverberations in the shape of increased membership. Growth continued, peaking in 1979, with nearly eighty members paying dues. Dignity's expansion had prompted Father Barron to arrange a new home for Dignity. In October, 1978, the group began to celebrate Mass in the Catholic Student Center on the Rice campus, where they continue to do so today. Membership stands at a healthy 70 and the group is increasingly visible, being an integral part of the annual Gay pride Week.

Dignity's long term goal of integration remains, however, far from being realized. That the group has spiritually healed many who had felt rejected from the orthodox Catholic Church, is beyond question. Yet the mainline Catholic Church in Houston remains aloof, effectively pursuing a policy of "benign neglect". In 1976, an attempt to meet with the Catholic Bishop of the Houston and Galveston diocese proved fruitless, the group only getting as far as the Chancellor, Monsignor Fiorenza, the present Bishop of San Angelo. In anticipation of losing St. Anne's a request to the Chancellor's office for a place to meet and a chapel, was coolly answered with the suggestion that Dignity try a local retreat center. On inquiry, Dignity found it to be booked for the next six months. Other Dignity chapters, Milwaukee, Trenton, Fort Worth have had

more success and therefore, the degree of success, clearly, depends on the receptivity of the individual bishop. The Bishop of Galveston-Houston had turned down the idea of a direct ministry to homosexuals, on the grounds that, if you give homosexuals a ministry, then the prostitutes of the city and other sundry groups would begin to demand the same treatment and recognition. Nevertheless, the level of membership has proved Dignity to be a support group with a viable function in the city of Houston, despite the opinion of the Catholic hierarchy.⁸²

Integrity, the homosexual Episcopalian support group, does not possess the same colorful and controversial past but serves very much the same function as Dignity, except for a different group of people. Integrity recognized no basic contradiction between homosexuality and Christianity.

The primary goal of Integrity is to help its members discover and affirm that we can be both gay and Christian. Many gay people have been led to believe that the two are mutually exclusive. We believe that it is possible to be gay and Christian, and that faith and sexuality are integral forces which inform all human perception.⁸³

Although they recognized no contradiction, they did recognize that homosexual Episcopalians had been rejected by their Church. "Through Integrity, we attempt to explore the meaning of salvation, in spite of rejection and misunderstanding, we sometimes experience at the hands of

both church and society."⁸⁴ Integrity, too, was "a healing ministry...a part of the real church."⁸⁵ Integrity, like Dignity, was not separatist. "Integrity is a support group which helps its members pursue meaningful involvement in their respective parishes."⁸⁶ Its commitment was firm.

They (homosexuals) have been taught that their gayness is sick or sinful and have been led to believe that they are inferior in the eyes of God and the Church. Integrity hopes to be a corrective force, enabling gay people to be open, honest, practicing Christians within the parish life of the Church.

Integrity, Houston was formed in 1976, when five people celebrated the Eucharist in a private apartment. Initially, the group was called Episcopal Integrity as there already existed within Houston a secular organization with the title, Integrity. Later, to avoid confusion, Integrity became Interact and Episcopal Integrity became, simply, Integrity. The Integrity network is nationwide, with representation in over 50 U. S. cities and an office in Washington to represent the homosexual Christian in legislative affairs.⁸⁸

Integrity, like Dignity and the other support groups, formed because they believed it was impossible for certain homosexual members of their respective denominations to worship and gain spiritual satisfaction in the catch-all Metropolitan Community Church system. They themselves did not fit there. They were unwilling to sacrifice part of their religious heritage. Their aim was to heal the alienated

homosexual, to educate their respective denominations and eventually integrate into the mainline church.

Integrity, on their own admission, has put little effort into the task of education, communicating minimally with the Episcopal churches in Houston. At least twice a month, the group celebrates Eucharist at the Autry House, attracting a congregation of up to 35, roughly equivalent to the present paid up membership. The mailing list is much larger, over 200.⁸⁹ Recently, in order to rectify the situation of limited membership, Integrity attempted to increase name recognition with an advertisement in This Week in Texas, employing the slogan of "Trashed by the Church?" Whatever the results, Integrity has become a part of the Houston homosexual community, providing a much needed alternative.⁹⁰

Lutherans Concerned For Gays, although smaller than both Integrity and Dignity, with an active membership of roughly twenty, has made strides that the two larger organizations have not. Like its bigger compatriots and like the Gay Unitarian/Universalist Caucus and A Cappella Chorus, Lutherans Concerned For Gays came into being with a definite integration and educational function. It was "not a goal to become a church" but to "support the homosexual Lutheran, who had had a hard time accepting his homosexuality."⁹¹ The group intended to influence the opinion of the mainline church and in this case, they had

proved worthy. Both Christ the King on Rice Boulevard and Grace Lutheran on Waugh Drive had become "very supportive" and "very open to gay people."⁹² Through a persistent dialogue initiated by Kent Naasz, the founder of the Houston chapter of Lutherans Concerned For Gays, good lines of communication and a healthy mutual comprehension had been established between the churches and the group. Jim Brown, the present chairperson, concluded relatively optimistically that, "at the parish level, we are making many great strides."⁹³

Formed in November, 1977, by Kent Naasz, the group has experienced little growth. The monthly service which is held at Grace Lutheran Church is regularly attended by a hard core of 10. They seemed to have difficulty in recruiting anyone except ex-ministers. Both Naasz and Brown had been through seminary. Brown was, in fact, an ordained pastor for nine years in Iowa, before the Lutheran hierarchy learnt of his homosexuality and suddenly no longer required his services. Naasz, although he went through seminary, was never ordained because he had been openly homosexual.⁹⁴

Although the group acknowledged the value of MCC-Houston, they asserted, "we have a specific thing to say to the Lutheran Church about being gay and being Christian, and we can't do it within MCC."⁹⁵ Therefore, despite the group's relative stagnation in terms of membership, Lutherans Concerned For Gays believed firmly that they

played a valid part in Houston's homosexual community.

Even so, the Lutheran success could not compare to the achievements of the homosexual Unitarians. Although the Houston caucus was not established until 1977, nationally the Unitarian Church had passed resolutions, affirming the gay lifestyle as early as 1974. That year, the Church provided funds and set up the Office of Gay Concerns at the continental headquarters in Boston. The bureau was headed by an openly homosexual minister and continues to function today, supported by a board, made up of representatives of the gay caucuses from all the various districts.⁹⁶

The caucuses can be traced back to Liberal Religious Youth, a Unitarian group that considered the problems of sexuality and the Church as early as 1970. In the early seventies, a statewide Texas organization, T.U.G.S. provided a forum for discussion. In Toronto, in 1972, the first actual caucus was established and the concept spread until the new movement was in a position to petition for the Unitarian Church's support for homosexual civil rights.⁹⁷

The Houston group was a direct result of the Anita Bryant campaign and her visit to the city as a guest of the Texas Bar Association. "Gay people in the Church and some of their supporters wanted to organize a response."⁹⁸ At first, the organization was called the Lambda Club, meeting every Friday but in 1980, the social function was dropped and

the group became a caucus, operating within the First Unitarian Church on Fannin Street. Some members of the congregation were offended and had switched their allegiance to the Emerson Unitarian Church on Bering Drive. Nevertheless, the caucus became firmly integrated into the structure of the Church, to the extent that, as an official sub-group, it was allocated a quota of money it had to raise for the Church. Homosexuals were on the Church board at various times and every fourth Sunday in June, the caucus would perform and structure the service.⁹⁹

Thus, the Gay Unitarian/Universalist Caucus, could be regarded more as an integral part of the Church rather than a support group. To a degree that is true, but the First Unitarian Church is not representative of the other four Unitarian congregations in Houston. There remains a job to be done there as there still does at the First Unitarian Church and within the homosexual community itself. The caucus is definitely, "pushing the Church within the gay community", its aim, "to bring the Church to the gay people, and to bring gay people to the Church."¹⁰⁰

A Cappella Chorus, so named because most congregations of the Church of Christ Fellowship have no instrumental music, was established at the Montrose Activity Center in January, 1979, by homosexual members of the Church, "to provide educational and spiritual support to each

other and the Church as a whole."¹⁰¹ Homosexuals from the Church of Christ, like their Lutheran, Catholic and Episcopalian counterparts have felt wounded and alienated by the official line of their Church.

How disappointing it is, then, when we are rejected not only by the world, but also by the Church that has taught and nurtured us. Sometimes through open hostility, other times through 'tolerant compassion', oppression serves to keep gay people in hiding, lonely and self-hating. It is difficult, if not impossible, to fully celebrate Christ in our lives, let alone encourage others to know the selfless love of Jesus, in a church that rejects, or at best ignores, Christians because of the norms of general society.¹⁰²

In terms of success, A Cappella Chorus does not approach the Lutherans or the Unitarians, but does provide another important alternative for the homosexual in Houston, especially if the homosexual's spiritual roots are planted in the Church of Christ.

In summary, the support groups offer a further choice to the homosexual in Houston, looking for a religious home. If a homosexual Catholic cannot accept the catch-all theology of MCC-Houston, Dignity supplies an important alternative. This is of course true of all the denominations with their relative support groups. The Unitarians differ to the extent that they worship openly within a mainline congregation and are fully integrated into the structure of the Church. Basically, though, the support groups aim to educate, heal and integrate and each has achieved its goals to some degree. Healing, perhaps, has been their greatest forte and success. The support groups are important, simply

because they do exist and their existence widens the choice for the homosexual who is neither pentecostal nor attracted to the catch-all liturgy of the separatist homosexual churches.

In 1978, the Methodist Bishop of Houston, Bishop Finis A. Crutchfield, appointed Reverend Ronald Pogue to the ministry of the Bering Memorial Methodist Church on Harold Street in Montrose. Pogue said of his appointment, "when I came here, it was with the understanding that I was going to personally be open to ministry with the gay community."¹⁰³ Pogue had been on the Bishop's staff and had been known to have homosexual friends.

Bishop Crutchfield himself had arrived in Houston in 1976 from New Orleans, where he had been Bishop of Louisiana. In New Orleans, he had become well acquainted with the homosexual community when he had agreed to lead a commemorative service for homosexual victims of a fire. The conflagration had claimed 29 lives, including the local MCC minister.¹⁰⁴ The first Methodist church in New Orleans was packed and when he was asked why he had done it, the bishop answered that "it was the compassionate, Christian thing to do."¹⁰⁵ The appointment of Pogue was a deliberate decision by the Methodists to create a homosexual outreach.

The logic behind the decision was sound. The Bering Memorial Church was located in a neighborhood in which a high percentage of

homosexuals lived. The rationale was that a church should serve the particular needs and lifestyles of the community in which it is situated. If this was the case in Missouri City and Sugarland, why should it not be so in Montrose? Yet, the decision was still a courageous one. In 1976, the Methodists at General Conference had reaffirmed their 1972 statement of not condoning the practice of homosexuality. Pogue's appointment came two years later, two years before the next general conference in 1980. However, opposition did appear amongst the older members of the congregation who were "afraid of the gays taking over the church."¹⁰⁶ Other reasons, too, triggered the protest, a fear of their loss of power and, that they would no longer be able to mould the social activities around their needs. In all 75 to 80 people transferred their membership elsewhere.¹⁰⁷

Reverend Pogue was keenly aware of the part he should play. "My role has been as a catalyst to enable change in this church, and part of that change is finding out who lives within a two mile radius of this church and what their needs are."¹⁰⁸ Bering Memorial, like the First Unitarian Church began to be listed in This Week in Texas on the suggestion of some of the homosexual members of the congregation. The pluralist nature of the Methodist Church places no restrictions on where the independent churches advertise their ministry but, again, the move took courage.¹⁰⁹ Bering's increasingly favorable reputation

attracted homosexuals from other parishes. Families of homosexuals began to seek counselling as did homosexuals of other denominations whose pastors had not been trained to deal with the problems of homosexuality.¹¹⁰ Of the present church membership, approximately 500, an estimated 20% are homosexual. Not surprisingly, since the arrival of Reverend Pogue, the average age of the congregation has declined from 64 to somewhere between 40 and 45.¹¹¹

Despite the success of his outreach, Pogue was quick to acknowledge the worth of the alternative churches. "Their ministry is very much needed, because there are gay people who are hurting so much that they just cannot find themselves at home and comfortable in a church that is part of a denomination."¹¹² Relations between Bering Memorial and MCC-Houston are strong. Both Reverend Larsen and Reverend Pogue were products of the same seminary at Emory University in Atlanta, and, together, they had experienced many of the same frustrations when dealing with Houston's homosexual community.

Nevertheless, Reverend Pogue saw a specific function for his church. There were homosexual Methodists who could not acclimatize to MCC-Houston's style of worship. Moreover, Bering Memorial had tradition and, therefore credibility, but most importantly, a lot of homosexuals, "don't want to be a member of a church that is all gay. They don't want to be a member of anything that is all gay. They want to be a part of

heterogenous society. They want their church to be a kind of community, that they would like for the rest of the world."¹¹³ Thus, Bering Memorial was a positive agency of integration and seen by homosexuals as that. Homosexuals and heterosexuals functioned smoothly together and worshipped in harmony. Fortunately, Bishop Crutchfield had chosen a most able man in Reverend Pogue and his courageous decision rendered the most positive results.

Some homosexuals forsook the spiritual altogether, usually alienated by what they saw as the inherent bigotry of the mainline Church. Others did so for more personal reasons. For those that chose atheism as the alternative, Houston possessed an organization, into which they could channel their energies, the Gay Atheist League of America. National GALA was formed in San Francisco in 1978 with one predominant goal. "We are an education group that seeks to make gay people realize that their worst enemy is organized religion."¹¹⁴

Responding to the question whether religion might be of value as a moral basis to social behaviour, Daniel Curzon, ex-Catholic and joint founder of GALA replied, "I feel that people can be good on the basis of reason alone, not out of fear of eternal damnation."¹¹⁵

The Houston chapter of GALA was singlehandedly organized in 1980 by Don Sanders and has remained fairly controversial ever since. Sanders, a Southern Baptist, wrote to his hometown church in 1978 to have his

name removed from the membership role. In the letter, he explained he was a practicing homosexual.¹¹⁶ His argument was not only with the mainline churches but also with the alternative churches. "How can gay people, homosexual people be knocking on the doors of gay churches, asking for acceptance of an institution that has so thoroughly demonstrated its contempt for them throughout history, burnt them at the stake, has told them they're bad."¹¹⁷ The support groups were equally ferociously condemned. "They appear to me (Don Sanders) to be begging acceptance into some sick organization that's thoroughly hated their guts."¹¹⁸ MCC-Houston was singled out. "MCC is the most dangerous of them all."¹¹⁹ Sanders attributed all the discrimination that homosexuals encounter to having its roots in religion. It was the basis of all prejudice. Therefore, Sanders and GALA set out to educate homosexuals to become aware of religious bigotry, to maintain and protect state and church separation and to lobby for church taxation.¹²⁰

Organization was a problem, because he found atheism and individualism seemed to go hand in hand. Naturally, there was a large amount of negative reaction, ranging from accusations that the atheist stand was the work of Satan to the more plausible accusation that atheism created divisions within the homosexual community. Sanders acknowledged the inherent disadvantage of GALA. "When you take the

word, 'gay' and you tack on the word 'atheist', you have got two things against you there."¹²¹

Far from being dispirited, Sanders pressed on and sought greater exposure for his group, setting up a stand at the 1981 Westheimer Arts Festival, and establishing the only Dial-A-Gay-Atheist service in the United States. In 1981, GALA also took part in the annual Gay Pride Week parade. Their float, a fire truck, diplomatically placed at the rear of the procession, carried a placard, stating, "No Hellfire For Us." In 1982, their slogan aroused much more controversy, "Jewish Nazis? Black Klansmen? Gay Christians?"¹²² An attempt to remove them from the parade was smoothed over. On a national level, Troy Perry had accused the atheists of being devious. Houston reaction ranged from "big deal" to "I do think GALA is needlessly provocative."¹²³ Nevertheless, GALA offered the Houston homosexual one more option and, controversial or not, it has a specific role to play.

The religious institutions and groups which have catered to the spiritual needs of homosexuals in Houston, since 1969, can be divided into three essential categories. The first group, the alternative churches, MCC-Houston, the Community Gospel Center, the New Freedom Christian Church and the Church of Christian Faith, have established themselves as independent institutions. Their aim was and is long term permanence and not eventual integration with the mainline Church. With

the exception of the Community Gospel Center, which is specifically pentecostal, the alternative churches have a catch-all approach because the majority of the congregation share not a common denomination but a common sexuality. They are churches for homosexuals. In terms of numbers, the catch-all theology also makes the churches a viable proposition. MCC-Houston dominates the other churches, which once again with the exception of the Community Gospel Center, have their roots in the MCC-Houston. Although MCC-Houston has matured from an extensive national organization, dissatisfaction with its priorities has led to these breakaway churches, a trend that is sure to continue as homosexuals gain more spiritual confidence. Historically, the mainline Church has divided through the centuries over a number of issues and, in turn, has created a wide spectrum of denominations which compete for congregation and jealously guard their identities. The homosexual churches, in their short lifetime, are beginning to display the same characteristics, perhaps a healthy parallel.

The second category, the denominational support groups, Dignity, Integrity, Lutherans Concerned For Gays, A Cappella Chorus, and the Gay Unitarian/Universalist Caucus, have experienced greater cooperation among themselves. Based specifically on denominations, they feel more secure. It is harder for a homosexual Catholic to defect to an Episcopalian group, than it is for a homosexual to switch from one

catch-all church to another. In addition, their goals are not separatist in nature. They aim to educate the mainline Church, to nurse the spiritually wounded homosexual and to reconcile the two. The degrees of success have varied from one group to another but there has been definite progress. Nevertheless, efforts to increase membership have fallen on stony ground, the groups operating with a hard core of activists. Clearly the support groups, like the small independent churches, remain somewhat in the shadow of MCC-Houston.

The third category has no single characteristic, but consists of the other available religious options. However, the second category and the third category are somewhat straddled by the Gay Unitarian/Universalist Caucus, which, although it operates as a support group, functions within a church with a gay outreach, that outreach, being coordinated and operated by the caucus itself. Bering Memorial, like the First Unitarian Church, has decided upon ministering to the homosexual community, due in part to its location in the heart of Montrose. It has been extremely successful in producing a harmonious congregation, made up of both homosexuals and heterosexuals. The task has not been without cost but integration has been neatly achieved. With MCC-Houston, Bering Memorial has proved to be the most dynamic religious organization, catering for the spiritual needs of the Houston homosexual community.

Finally, there is GALA, which would protest vigorously at being categorized with the Bering Memorial Methodist Church, or any other religious institution. GALA is as much a political organization as an anti-religious group, because it veiw[s] the Church, alternative or mainline, through a political focus. It seeks to educate the homosexual to what it sees as the heinous crimes committed by churches, especially those, whose victims were homosexual. It acts as a watchdog on issues that concern Church and state separation and pushes for Church taxation.

It is evident that the homosexual in Houston has a wide choice of religious organizations when it comes to selecting a spiritual home. Whatever denomination the homosexual happens to be from, there is an option, be it an alternative church, a support group or a mainline church with a deliberate outreach. Since 1970, with the emergence of Dignity, the city of Houston has increasingly offered the homosexual a wider spectrum of viable alternatives, until now that choice is almost as large as it is for the heterosexual. And yet, the estimated number of homosexuals in Houston in 1980 equaled approximtely 100,000, and the homosexual congregations were far from approaching that figure. Either the vast majority continue to worship within the mainline Church or have left without seeking an alternative. Nevertheless, the existing organizations provide viable and vital services, and do add to the homosexual's sense of community and identity.