



# QNotes

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## Black, gay and Christian: the importance of the church in LGBT communities of color

Q-Notes looks at three congregations across N.C.

by Donald Miller

Oftentimes religious devotion and commitment to human equality across the board are not concepts that easily walk hand in hand — thus many gays and lesbians find themselves turning away from Christianity.

There are others in the LGBT community, however, that have reconciled their sexual orientation with their faith. Some denominations of Christianity, including The United Church of Christ, The Metropolitan Community Church, Unity Fellowship and many other independent churches that identify as a variety of denominations, ranging from Methodist and Presbyterian to Lutheran and even Baptist openly accept — even embrace — gays and lesbians as members and clergy.

Nowhere is that spirit of belief and support more evident than in the churches that serve predominantly LGBT communities of color.

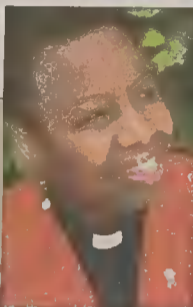
For many, if not most of the African-American LGBT community, the ties to the church today are as strong as they were for the generations that came before them.

"It's a concept that goes back to the days of slavery," says Rev. Wanda Floyd, the pastor of Imani MCC in Durham. "God is all we ever had, so I think it's sort of ingrained in our blood. The history of being spiritual beings have seen us though so much — slavery, oppression, the fight for civil rights. The church has always been a backbone to the African-American community. I think it would be too difficult to turn away from something you had spent your lifetime in, just because some people in the faith don't share the belief that God creates us as we are."

Rev. Roger Hayes, the pastor of Church of the Holy Spirit Fellowship in Winston-Salem, concurs with Floyd's assessment.

"Our need and quest for solace and peace initially came about in the midst of lots of oppression. Blacks turned to the church for

Unity Fellowship's Rev. Elder Tonia Rawls.



### Spiritual merriment at Unity Fellowship.

hope at a time when there was none. The message is there in the African-American hymns, the Negro spiritual — if you will — centered around a future of hope in gospel songs like 'This World Is Not My Home.' That root runs very deep in our community. The root of faith is not a shallow root — so it's something that's very hard to let go of."

"I think for us, church is community," says Rev. Elder Tonyia Rawls of the Unity Fellowship Church in Charlotte. "For many people of African descent — that's where they gained their core of strength."

Rawls moved to Charlotte from Washington, D.C. in 2000 to found **Unity Fellowship**, which today boasts a membership around 260.

She's acutely aware of the challenges gays and lesbians often face when coming to terms with their sexual orientation while attempting to maintain the spiritual life they've grown accustomed to.

For a time Rawls lived in California, where she attended church while living life deep in the closet. "At that time I lead an abstinent life," says Rawls. "I felt I couldn't be a same gender loving woman and serve God. What made me change my mind was I almost got married to an elder in the church. This

man came to me and said he felt that I was supposed to be his wife, so at first I thought this was something I was supposed to do — but I knew I was not straight! I went to God very angry — I said 'you don't love me how could you do this to me?' God spoke to me and told me that he did, in fact, love me as I am. So I called off the wedding and moved to D.C. I began a journey — seeking God in prayer and I realized God didn't make a mistake. Shortly thereafter I found Unity and for the first time I heard gay and good — at the same time.

Unity is predominantly African-American and LGBT, with an ever growing number of

heterosexuals and non-blacks.

The church is very active in both the LGBT community and the greater Charlotte community at large with performances by the Unity Fellowship Choir and a Drum Corp for youth ages 4-18.

Rawls is exuberant about the level of involvement from church-goers. "We ask them to tithe — but we also ask them to offer their time and talent. People are writing, dancing, singing and miming. We've been in the MLK parade for five years. There's a lot of talent here."

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## Charlotte Community Center faces uncertain future

Debt, lack of donations and staff overturn take mounting toll

by David Moore . Q-Notes staff

CHARLOTTE — Q-Notes reported last issue that the Charlotte Lesbian and Gay Community Center is fighting an uphill battle to survive. Since that article, amidst reports of

employee turmoil, Center manager Linda Davis has been laid off and Executive Director Laura Witkowski has submitted her resignation.

"It is with enormous amounts of sadness and regret that I submit my letter of resignation as executive director of The Lesbian and Gay Community Center effective Feb. 1, 2007," Witkowski wrote in a letter to Center Board President Joe Campos, dated Jan. 9.

"To the community," Witkowski continued, "do not take The Center for granted any longer. This is an organization in its infancy in many ways ... it often feels like this community is thrilled The Center exists, but that many don't feel

the need to support it because they don't feel they 'need' it. To those who don't feel they need The Center, I ask you: how many non-profit social service organizations would cease to exist if only the population they served supported them?"

According to Campos, the situation at The Center has improved somewhat since Q-Notes last covered the issue. With staff cutbacks and volunteers keeping The Center open, little may seem to have changed to the general public. "Things are better," says Campos. "We are moving in

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The Lesbian & Gay Community Center

### Universal message



Providence High School staff sprays over GSA's rainbow rock. See Editor's note, page 4.