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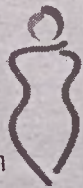
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'Who would Jesus exclude?'

Western N.C. families organize
for support

by Sarah Benedek . The Mountaineer

"Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God."

This Bible verse, found in Romans 15:7, New American Standard Version, embodies the basis on which Christianity is based. Christians are expected to treat others with respect and acceptance, even if they don't agree with some choices others make.

Somewhere along the way, however, this message has become lost in many church congregations when it comes to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, their families and those who stand out in support of them. This is one of the many reasons why Helen King, member of First United Methodist Church of Waynesville, formed a support group for friends and family of LGBT persons almost a year ago.

"When our daughter came out to us 16 years ago," said King, "I immediately knew that church was the first place I couldn't go. It seemed like the most condemning place of all."

As far as King knows, the group she began is the first of its kind in Haywood County. The county does not have a chapter of PFLAG (Parents, Friends and Family of Lesbians and Gays) and there has not been a faith-based group of this sort. (PFLAG is not faith-based.) King felt there were other people within her church family who would understand the feelings she was having and who would benefit from knowing there were people who would understand.

"When people discover they are the parent of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person, they can feel isolated, lonely, confused, and fearful, especially if they are Christians," said King. "A support group such as ours can give them a listening, caring ear because many of us have been where they are. That was my main reason for wanting to start this kind of group within the church that would reach out to people of faith."

Ruth and Jim Hoyt, fellow First UMC members and attendees of the support group, were on board with the idea. Their son was not allowed, due to Methodist church rules, to pastor. He instead became a pastor of Unitarianism.

"Helen's experience, as it turned out, was shared by many people," said Ruth. "These people had felt the same prejudice and [family members of LGBT persons] felt the same kind of pushing away the actual gay person feels. You're afraid you have to stay in the closet along with your child."

"Ruth and I always accepted [their son] and we were shocked to find out how negative [the entirety of the United Methodist] church was toward both the parents and the [LGBT] child," said Jim. "Because to me, the love of Christ was prevalent over everything. To have people picking Bible verses [to condone the

rejection of LGBT persons], that shocked me. I still am shocked at the hurt we put on people in the name of Christ. That really bothers me."

King agrees with Jim's perspective and mentioned how the church has a bad history of being behind the times when it comes to accepting or rejecting things based on perceived interpretations of the Bible, such as "slavery, women's rights, that sort of thing."

"It all leads me to say to people, as a person of faith, to others of faith, 'Who would Jesus exclude?'" said King. "When I try to figure that out, I can't think of anyone."

Jim feels that in matters such as these, the church often oversteps boundaries.

"The main thing Ruth and I are trying to do it make people understand whatever you are is OK," he said. "It's not the church's job to make those kinds of judgements."

King added that the Methodist church as a whole tends toward the hypocritical in matters of homosexual members.

"In the Methodist church, we baptize babies," she said. "These are babies less than a year old, almost always. If the church is not going to accept these children later, when they discover for themselves they're homo-

sexual, then why is the church baptizing them?"

"I think the church needs to stop baptizing babies if they're not going to hold up their part of the baptismal covenant," she added.

As far as the support group is concerned, King said they are open to new members who are not members of the church.

"I saw the group as... a way to break the silence," said King. "Silence on the issue of homosexuality within the church feels like rejection and exclusion. And silence is also complacency. It implies complacency. People don't want to talk about what makes them uncomfortable. The group is a place where people can talk in confidence and with confidentiality, about their fears, their confusion, whatever."

"Acceptance is an important part of it," said Ruth.

As far as church rules and religious prejudices go, King points to the mission of the Methodist church, which is printed on a flag hanging by the door of First UMC and which reads, "Our mission is be the living body of the church. We are called to be a community with diverse opinions and gifts, united as children of God through the love of Christ. As an open and inclusive church, we invite ALL to the table. By belonging to Christ, we already belong to each other."

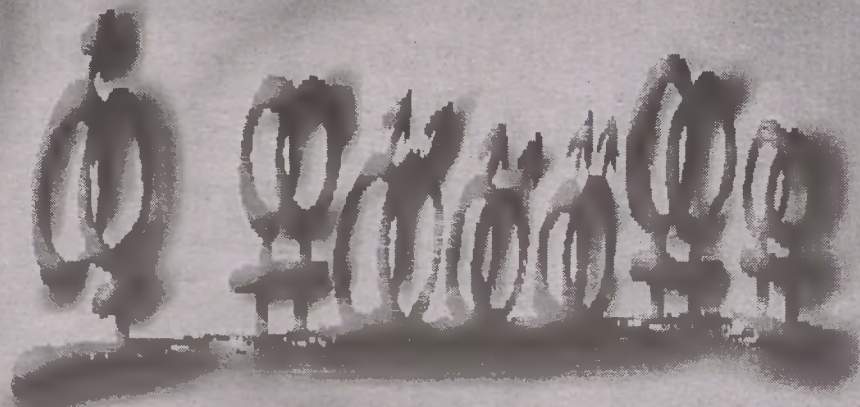
"I'm willing to bet most people who quote Bible verses [regarding why homosexuals should be viewed with derision] haven't actually read [the Bible]," said King. "Are they really basing their prejudices on [verses in Leviticus]? It's all sort of misinterpretation of the Bible."

"Maybe they have read it," amended King. "But they've misinterpreted it." ■

— Sarah Benedek is the lifestyles/religion editor of *The Mountaineer*, in Haywood County, N.C., which originally published this article on July 23, 2008. It is reprinted with permission.



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