

Some black ministers are openly welcoming gays

BY DAVID CRARY
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

In one-on-one chats and resounding sermons, the Rev. Kenneth Samuel is trying to lead his 6,000-strong congregation on a path few black churches have trod: wholehearted acceptance of lesbians and gays.

After convincing himself that homophobia should be combated as zealously as racism, Samuel severed his Victory Church's links with black- and white-led Baptist organizations. He plans to affiliate next month with the liberal United Church of Christ.

Grateful for Samuel's encouragement, some gays and lesbians have risen to leadership posts at the church in Stone Mountain, Ga., but many congregation members remain dubious of the changes.

"We're still working through it," Samuel said. "You can't just get up and say, 'OK, that settles it.' I'm trying to get the message out there that any kind of exclusion of persons — based upon their color, their gender, their sexual persuasion — is wrong."

Within the diverse spectrum of African-American churches, Victory Church is a rarity.

While some new, alternative churches have formed in recent years, only a handful of established black churches — mostly in big cities — have sent a clear welcome message to gays. Most black ministers, like many of their white counterparts, believe the Bible condemns homosexuality.

The coolness toward gays remains widespread even though many black churches, overcoming initial reluctance, have enlisted in campaigns to fight AIDS. In a newly released survey of more than 2,500 black gays and lesbians, 54 percent said their churches or religions view homosexuality as "wrong and sinful."

"Sunday sermons preaching against our very existence are still commonplace," wrote the authors of the Black Pride survey.

Donna Payne works with black churches as a field organizer for the Human Rights Campaign, a national gay-rights advocacy group. She describes homophobia in those churches as "a silent disapproval, sending a message to black gays and lesbians that they're not welcome."

"There are no policies in the African Methodist Episcopal Church that acknowledge that," she said,

referring to one of the largest black denominations. "It's not something they would write down, so there's not something there you can challenge."

Though some white denominations are more explicit in their condemnation of homosexual activity, churchgoing white gays and lesbians generally have more options than their black counterparts in finding an accepting church, Payne said. The result, she said, is that black gays often stick with the churches they were raised in — even if anti-gay sentiment occasionally surfaces.

"To separate from that, and just try to be gay, means you're into a whole 'nother world that you're not familiar with, the white gay world," Payne said. "It's so different, you'd rather go back and hold on to your African traditions."

An African Methodist Episcopal minister in Boston, the Rev. Ray Hammond, contended many black churches are becoming more welcoming to gays even though the pastors — himself included — balk at approving their sexual relationships.

"If the church is going to be true to its biblical roots, it cannot endorse the lifestyle and cannot endorse same-sex marriage," Hammond said.

Hammond, who switched to the ministry after earning a medical degree at Harvard, has engaged his Bethel AME Church in the fight against AIDS, both at home and in West Africa. He acknowledged that some black churches were slow to join the anti-AIDS crusade, but said this was often due to a general skittishness toward sexuality rather than outright disdain for gays.

"There obviously is homophobia, in communities of color like anywhere else, and it needs to be rooted out," he said.

But Hammond complained that some gay-rights activists are quick to allege homophobia in cases where black ministers speak out against same-sex marriage.

"Too often, in the gay rights movement, when you disagree on issues, you begin the name-calling," Hammond said.

For the Rev. Kathi Martin, acceptance of gays came too slowly to the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The daughter of a minister, she became pastor of an AME church in Decatur, Ga., in 1994, but left the denomination three years later after her superiors scolded her for sanctifying a same-sex



Rev. Kathi Martin speaks during the invitation with members of her flock at a United Church of Christ service in Atlanta. Martin, who is a lesbian, became a pastor for the UCC and started her own congregation, the God, Self and Neighbor Ministry, in 1999.

union. "They told me, 'You're ahead of your time,'" she said. "It was my choice to leave. Fighting against a denomination is not my thing."

Martin, a lesbian, became a pastor for the United Church of Christ and started her own UCC-affiliated congregation in Atlanta in 1999. Most of its members are gay blacks who were uncomfortable in traditional black churches.

"The church has always been a safe place for black people," Martin said. "For gay and lesbian African Americans, to feel that this is a place where you're not welcome, it's painful."

While Martin draws no more than 70 or 80 people to her weekly services, worshippers by the hundreds attend each of two Sunday morning services at Samuel's Victory Church. Both ministers preach the virtues of tolerance.

For Samuel, who has a wife and daughter and a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary, reach-

ing out to gays is a way to revive the commitment of black churches to social justice. He contends that homophobia in the black community is an outgrowth of racism.

"We've had to deal so much with the implications of black male castration, economically, politically and socially," he said. "The black community has tried to compensate by being homophobic. We have so few black men eligible to lead, to provide for families, that we need to make certain we don't lose any more to same-sex unions."

Once his own thinking on the matter crystallized, Samuel went to work on his congregation, preaching that "we are not being untrue to our faith by affirming all people." But he remains a step ahead of many members of the church.

"We've not gotten to the point where we can celebrate same-sex unions," he said. "I'd be ready for that today, but the people aren't there yet. We still have a way to go."

McMillan graduates with Ph.D. from UNC-CH

FROM STAFF REPORTS

After winning acclaim and praise as a much-loved teacher in the city-county school system, Felecia Piggott McMillan left her classroom several years to pursue a longtime dream — a Ph.D.

Sunday, McMillan, who has been The Chronicle's community correspondent for nearly 10 years, graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, becoming one of only a small percentage of African Americans to earn a Ph.D. this year.



Dr. Felecia P. McMillan

McMillan is a member of Emmanuel Baptist Church, where she has served as the president of the Youth Council, a teacher and a member of the Sunday school department, and a member of the Spiritual Choir. Additionally, she was a student in the Kemet School of Knowledge who eventually became the director of the Kemet Academy, a Christian Afro-centric Summer Youth Camp. Having accepted Christ at an early age, she wants young people to know

that "God is a friend that really has your back."

McMillan has already built a fine career record. She has worked as an English and journalism teacher at Mount Tabor High School for more than 10 years, where she founded the Ebony American Society, the Gospel Choir, a sign language choir and a drama ensemble. She was also a technical writing instructor, SAT prep teacher, and track coach until she chose to take a leave of absence from the classroom to pursue her Ph.D. in African-American literature.

McMillan has won many awards. Her journalism staff at Mount Tabor High School won a first-place ranking from the National Scholastic Press Association in Chapel Hill. Also, she won the Southeast Regional Excellence in Teaching Award from the National Council of

Negro Women in 1996, the Terry Sanford Award for Creativity for the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School System, the Human Relations Award, Teacher of the Year at Mount Tabor, all from the Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools. The Winston-Salem Urban League honored her with the Outstanding African American Female Award in 1993. In 2001, she was recognized by the YMCA Black Achievers Program and the Methodist Churches of America

for her coverage as a representative for The Chronicle.

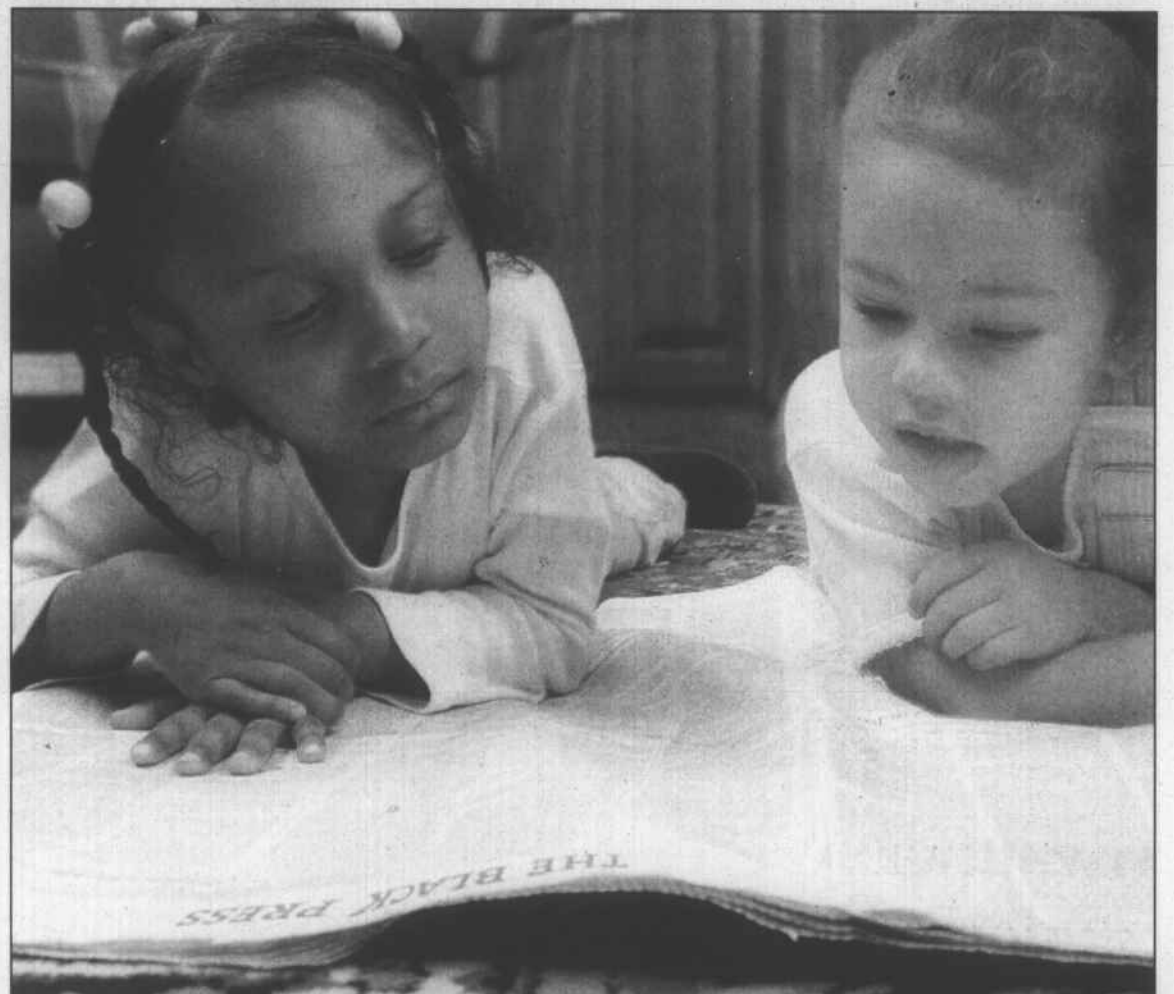
She has also tutored students through the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority's SAT preparation class for three years. She is a member of the Phi Omega Chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. and of Meridian Chapter 308 of The Order of the Eastern Star organization. She was also the first director of the William C. Sims Learning Center in Happy Hill Garden for two years. She has presented more than 200 pro-

grams on African-American poetry, history, music, drama, fashion and African American culture for various churches, civic groups, fraternal organizations and academic groups.

Education is the cornerstone of her development. She completed her B.A. in English education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; her master's degree at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. She has taught freshman composition at UNC-Chapel

Hill, N.C. A&T State University and Winston-Salem State University. She has also helped N.C. A&T State University to create a concentration in technical writing that will begin in the fall of 2003.

She is the daughter of the late Benjamin Howard Piggott and Mae Clarida Piggott. She has three brothers — Ben, Ronald and Kermit — and one sister, Marcia. Her daughter, Reynita McMillan, is 12 years old. Her nieces, Asha, Brittany, Chelsea, and Monica, are also special blessings to her.



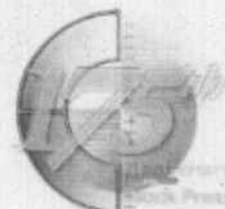
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INDEX

OPINION.....	A6
SPORTS.....	B1
RELIGION.....	B4
CLASSIFIEDS.....	B10
HEALTH.....	C3
ENTERTAINMENT.....	C7
CALENDAR.....	C9