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# Adventists Face Homosexuality

by Elvin Benton

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**H**omosexuality — the word itself, the orientation it describes, the lifestyles it can represent — all of these and more are being increasingly acknowledged as urgent questions facing the church.

The denomination is responding in a variety of ways. A large part of the September 1981 issue of *Ministry* was devoted to “Homosexual Healing”; it featured a 10-page interview of Colin Cook by editor Robert Spangler, a three-page study by Raoul Dederen, professor of historical theology at the Seventh-day Adventist seminary, and an editorial by Spangler. The church organization has appropriated major amounts of money to help establish the Quest Learning Center in Reading, Pennsylvania. Headed by Colin Cook, the express purpose of the center is to help homosexuals achieve reorientation. As part of its general study of sexuality, the Biblical Research Institute as of latest reports has assigned a research paper (albeit only one) on the subject of homosexuality.

One of the most intriguing, and in many

ways, significant efforts of administrators to respond to the issue of homosexuality was the approval top church administrators gave to six Adventist scholars and pastors attending a gathering of some 35 homosexuals in early August 1980. The convocation was organized by Kinship, a group which describes itself as “An Organization for Gay Seventh-day Adventists and Their Friends.” What Kinship described as a camp meeting was a major event in the long story of Adventist homosexuals. Whoever was the first homosexual Adventist probably kept the fact very quiet for the same reason that most homosexual Adventists still do: his or her church membership would have been in jeopardy if it were known that he or she was gay.

In the mid-’70s, a significant number of homosexuals, currently and formerly Seventh-day Adventists, responded to classified ads placed by a few Adventists in widely circulated gay magazines and newspapers. “Am I the only gay Seventh-day Adventist?” asked one. The response was so overwhelming that the one who placed the ad could not find time to answer all the letters.

Many had assumed that there were no

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other Adventist homosexuals and had determined either to hide the fact of their gayness or to leave the church and find a spiritual environment where their homosexuality would not seem to pose a threat to their fellow believers. Some found fellowship in Metropolitan Community Churches which sprang up in larger cities after the first one was founded in the Los Angeles area in the late '60s by Troy Perry. One of Perry's staunchest supporters in beginning the MCC was a former Seventh-day Adventist.

In early January 1977, a handful who had responded to a newspaper ad placed by a gay Adventist met in Palm Desert, California. It was the beginning of Kinship, and by April there were 75 members, a temporary chairman and four committees: membership, educational, social, and spiritual. The new group, largely from southern California, met two Sabbaths a month and also planned social events. A Chicago chapter soon began to thrive, and Kinship leaders had hopes for groups in all parts of the world where there are Adventists.

The organization was incorporated in March 1981 as Seventh-day Adventist Kinship International, Incorporated. Its mailing list in 10 countries now approaches 500 and includes a broad spectrum of occupations. The ratio of professional people is disproportionately high. A significant number are denominational employees, most of whom, understandably, use pseudonyms in their relationship to Kinship. Almost all are or have been Seventh-day Adventist church members. Several are friends of Adventists and would become church members except for what they perceive to be the church's negative attitude toward their homosexuality.

The idea of having a special camp meeting for homosexual Adventists was born at an early 1980 Kinship board meeting. The possibility of inviting a group of Adventist ministers was conceived shortly thereafter by a Kinship board member, who brought the idea to fruition by careful negotiation with General Conference administrators, who may have thought Kinship was appealing for denominational help to escape from homosexuality. Kinship leaders assert, rather, that they sought only mutual understanding be-

tween the church organization and gay Adventists and deny that any attempt was made to let it appear they were seeking "deliverance" from their orientation.

The spiritual interests of those attending the camp meeting in Arizona surprised many onlookers. "Listen to those gays; they keep singing hymns," marvelled one stranger, a guest at the ranch-style retreat where the camp meeting was held. Considering the stories of disappointment and frustration many of them shared at an evening meeting (see pages 38-46), their continued interest in the church was indeed noteworthy.

The camp meeting was rated a success by most, if not all, who were there. "I can't think of any other experience in my life, on a spiritual level, that has been so important," asserted one. Said another, "It's reaffirmed my faith that God is really watching over us, His children."

The church's authorized representatives, affectionately dubbed "the clergy" by the Kinship members, were Josephine Benton, pastor of the Rockville, Maryland, Seventh-day Adventist church; Colin Cook, then a counselor at the Green Hills Health Center in Reading, Pennsylvania, formerly an Adventist pastor in England and America, now director of the Quest Learning Center, also in Reading; James J. C. Cox, then professor of New Testament at the SDA seminary, now president of Avondale College in Australia; Lawrence T. Geraty, Old Testament scholar and professor of archeology and history of antiquity at the seminary; Fritz Guy, professor of theology at the seminary; and James Londis, pastor of the Sligo Seventh-day Adventist church in Takoma Park, Maryland.

Three (Cox, Geraty and Guy) were chosen because they were biblical and theological scholars. Two (Benton and Londis) represented pastoral concern. Cook, the only one of the six "clergy" who didn't claim to be "hopelessly heterosexual," was in the unique position of having practiced what he called "compulsive homosexual activity" for most of his adult life and for the immediately past several years having experienced a shift to a

heterosexual lifestyle. Cook, now married and a father, has written in denominational publications (*Insight, Ministry*) on the subject of the gospel's power to "deliver" Christians from homosexual tendencies.

Each of the "clergy" was given a generous amount of time to relate the results of his or her study and observations.

The two pastors, both of whom were familiar with the pain and isolation felt by homosexual members of their congregations, emphasized the need for the church's making an effort to understand gay people before judging the quality of their Christianity. Each had suggestions for relieving the hurt, suspicion and isolation that homosexuals have come to expect.

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James Londis described what he believed to be a vast pastoral ignorance about homosexual people and their problems. He cited emotional damage as a frequent result of pastoral bungling and noted that many homosexuals have suffered a loss of self-image when their ministers write them off as basically bad. Often, they are suicidal after their pastors condemn them, causing them to believe they are eternally lost. Insensitive pastors often urge gays to marry, said Londis, thus adding to their sense of hopelessness when they know they are not attracted to the opposite sex. Ministers need to be educated, Londis urged, adding that those who have studied the issue in depth should help those who have not.

Josephine Benton related how her experience in pastoring and counseling Adventist homosexuals for seven years had forced her

to ask, "Would God require a whole group of people either to change orientation or be celibate when they didn't choose their orientation, and statistics say perhaps only four percent could change even with extensive counseling?"

"It's so easy for me, a happily married heterosexual, to say, 'You homosexual people must be celibate to be right with God,' " she reflected. Much study had convinced her that, while God was *able* to change anyone in any way, evidence needed to be examined concerning what God in fact does.

Colin Cook's presentation, made early Sabbath morning in a quiet Ponderosa grove near the ranch, was essentially a frank story of his emotional and sexual life. Laced with observations about the power of the gospel to change people, Cook's story was in sharp contrast to the experiences reported by most of the Kinship members who heard him. Cook asserted that everyone is by nature heterosexual, and that homosexual tendencies come from an illusory identity stemming from man's fall. To return to the rejoicing heterosexuality the Maker intended, Cook believes homosexuals must and can find deliverance by a "trained faith-response" through the gospel.

After offering his own experience as evidence of the possibility of change, Cook was queried closely by Kinship members who had "tried everything," including years of prayer, hundreds of hours of psychotherapy, and anointing by elders of the church, all without significant alteration of their emotional and sexual attraction to those of the same gender. Did his "deliverance" happen suddenly, as when Jesus healed lepers? "No," said Cook, "it came gradually and painfully." Is he never attracted to men now? "Sometimes," he admitted freely. Other, even more intimate questions were frankly answered as Cook made it plain that he isn't free from attraction but believes he has been delivered from the power of those attractions.

Cook was patient, even under somewhat aggressive questioning, and asserted acceptance of Kinship and its members while conceding that he believed all homosexual relationships are unhealthy and sinful.

What began to be clear, as the theologians got into their presentations, was that a simplistic English reading of the few scriptural references to homosexual acts would not suffice to determine the Lord's will for homosexual persons today. Indeed, the theologians themselves admitted that until recently they were not well informed. "Abysmally ignorant," one called himself. "Part of the problem" (of misunderstanding gay people), admitted another. All freely conceded that their studies were not yet complete and that some questions might never have absolute answers.

Lawrence Geraty undertook to examine the scriptural references to homosexuality in the area of his expertise — the Old Testament. Pejorative references there to homosexual acts, said Geraty, "may not be so hard to understand, but how they apply can be learned only in the human situation." According to Geraty, the Sodom story, for example, clearly refers to sexual acts, but the acts seem primarily to stem not from homosexual passion but from intent to degrade Lot's angelic visitors to the lowly level of women, who were then considered little more than chattels. Repeated references in both Old and New Testaments condemn Sodom for its inhospitality, said Geraty, while little or no explicit reference is made to its sexual sins.

References to homosexual acts in the Levitical "holiness code" have been read by religious people to make moral judgment against those acts. However, noted Geraty, other parts of the same code, such as rules against sexual intercourse during menstruation and against mixing dissimilar fabrics in the same garment, are substantially ignored. Geraty observed that theologians, arguing that some of the holiness code rules are moral and some only ceremonial, have justified these divisions of the Levitical admonitions, but that a careful biblical scholar wouldn't divide them in this fashion. If any can be ignored, perhaps none should be considered binding.

Geraty's bottom-line conclusion: that the Old Testament *by itself* (without the counsel of the New Testament and a contemporary

theology of sexuality based on the whole testimony of scripture) is not sufficient to settle the question of the morality of homosexual relationships in today's world.

Fritz Guy's concern was for identifying the questions the church must answer in relation to homosexuality. Moral norms, he asserted, should be determined by scripture, but there is also need for empirical evidence about what *is*. Norms are useless in a vacuum.

The Genesis story clearly sets forth a male-female norm for human sexuality, Guy believes. However, he cited research evidence that people do not choose their basic sexual orientation, but that rather they discover it after it has been formed either by heredity (as some very recent research is suggesting) or in very early childhood. For those who discover that they are homosexually oriented, Guy suggested as a goal the highest level of moral behavior of which they are capable. He admitted that to many Adventists, even to some of his fellow theologians, referring to homosexual morality seems a contradiction of terms, "like talking about dry water."

Guy cited some of the questions he believes the church must wrestle with: Is reorientation always possible for a homosexual person? If not, what then? Is celibacy the only acceptable alternative? If so, has the church fairly considered the vast loneliness that mandatory celibacy would bring?

In response to an audience observation that many homosexuals don't have a choice of orientation, Guy acknowledged that "I am what I am, but I am still responsible for my behavior. Even if, for example, I am a 'latent adulterer,' I can't let my feelings at any moment determine my actions." Guy insisted that "anything goes" is not a morality at all; he also admitted that the church may have a pretty difficult time deciding what is acceptable and what isn't, and why.

James Cox began his presentation with a remarkably concise statement that there are no terms either in Old Testament Hebrew or New Testament Greek that precisely equal our English words "homosexuality" or "heterosexuality." In fact, Cox asserted, there is no discussion in scripture of homosexual orientation. While there is men-

tion of certain homosexual *acts* unacceptable in the Christian community, none is defined with sufficient specificity for us to know exactly what is being described. One must understand the context of any scriptural passage, said Cox, before the real meaning of the text can be understood.

Cox pointed to clear New Testament disapproval of some kinds of sexual acts, both homosexual and heterosexual, even if determining exactly what those acts were is difficult. What is clear, Cox maintained, is that sexual acts growing out of lust — misusing people — were patently unacceptable.

Cox closed his presentation by noting that neither Jesus nor Ellen White said anything explicitly about the issue of the morality of homosexuality. Perhaps, Cox suggested, a question worth exploring is how to be sexually responsible.

The camp meeting ended with emotional statements by both “clergy” and Kinship members that much distance between them had been closed and that suspicions had been laid to rest. One Kinship member, a professional who had offered his car for the 100-mile drive from the Phoenix airport to the camp meeting ranch, said, “I prayed they wouldn’t put a clergy in my car. They did, and it was very healing to discover he could understand me. I hope some of the clergy can ride back to Phoenix with me.”

Following the camp meeting, the six “clergy” were invited to an all-day meeting at General Conference headquarters to report to top General Conference officers, the editors of *Ministry* and the *Adventist Review*, and a few selected others. The “clergy’s” three-page typewritten report began with a page of affirming quotations from some of the Kinship members who attended. Then came a one-sentence summation from the “clergy”: “We must add that it was an enlarging and challenging intellectual and spiritual experience for us also.”

Some of the most important impressions the “clergy” reported to the top leadership were of the warmth of the camp meeting’s fellowship and the religious seriousness of the Kinship members who were there. Sev-

eral noted their new awareness of the spirituality of gay Christians and of the pain they have suffered by alienation from the church. The “clergy’s” report listed nine proposals which had been developed during the closing hours of the camp meeting. They were, verbatim:

1. That the officers of BRI (the Biblical Research Institute of the General Conference) be asked to set up a special subcommit-

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tee to study thoroughly the whole question of homosexuality and the church.

2. That balanced and responsible articles dealing with the biblical, theological and pastoral aspects of said topic be prepared for publication in the *Adventist Review* and *Ministry*.

3. That programs on sex education taught at our academies and colleges, seminaries and extension schools, church seminars and continuing education courses, and the like, include a unit on homosexuality.

4. That balanced and responsible reading lists be prepared for all the levels of education indicated under item 3.

5. That guidelines (similar to those voted by the Fall Councils of 1976 and 1977 with respect to divorce and remarriage) be drawn up for the benefit of pastors, teachers and administrators as they try to handle wisely, graciously and redemptively the particular cases of homosexuality that come under their care.

6. That we identify a number of informed and understanding pastors, teachers, counselors and other professionals, to whom our youth, on discovering that they might have a homosexual orientation, may turn with confidence.

7. That vehicles (such as hotlines) be set up so that youth in our academies, colleges and universities may contact such persons, assured of full confidentiality.

8. That the church recognize Kinship as a vehicle by which other young Seventh-day Adventists, discovering that they have a homosexual orientation, may find the help they seek. (Both the officers and general members of Kinship with whom we have been in contact have assured us that they are (a) opposed to proselytizing and (b) committed to referring those who call on them for help to those professionals who can give them the help they seek.)

9. That Josephine Benton and Lawrence Geraty be asked to serve as chaplains to the Kinship group. (The officers of Kinship have so requested.)

The proposals elicited vigorous discussion, resulting in qualified approval of the first seven and rejection of the last two. The first seven proposals could not be accomplished at once, since some could not be implemented before others were finished.

The last two proposals were rejected because it was felt that approving them would imply denominational recognition of Kinship, a step to which the church leadership was firmly opposed. There was apparent consensus, however, that while the church should not officially appoint denominational employees as chaplains for Kinship, the leadership would not stand in the way of their serving if they so chose and were approved by their employing institutions or organizations.

In the year and a half that has passed since that first camp meeting, much has happened. A second camp meeting, with twice as many in attendance, was held in northern California in August 1981. While the church was not asked to send representatives, five scholars and pastors met with the Kinship group. Reports from those in attendance reveal the same exuberance and optimism that characterized the 1980 camp meeting.

**E**ight regional Kinship groups have been organized in North America, each with its own director. There is a fast-growing group in

Australia, and Kinship leaders are confident that gay Adventists everywhere will respond when they learn of Kinship's existence. Local chapters have frequent Sabbath meetings, often gathering for potluck meals and afternoon and evening fellowship. A monthly newsletter goes to all members and trusted friends.

The church organization has not been idle. In addition to the preparation of the special *Ministry* issue on homosexuality, church officials at every level are speaking out in support of Colin Cook's Quest Learning Center. The leaders approve of the thesis Cook brought to the Kinship camp meeting, which is also the rationale he provides for his center: Although homosexual practice is sinful, God loves homosexual people and calls them to find their heterosexual identity in Christ through the training of their faith.

To some, the church's actions seem premature. Said one concerned pastor, "They're in over their heads. They've decided the issue without studying it." Several observers, both gay and nongay, wish the church's support could be directed to a more neutral program than Cook's. "We wouldn't mind if he simply offered to help us change, without trying to make it look like that's the only way we can be moral," said a young woman after hearing Cook lecture.

Others applaud the church leadership's apparently firm stand against accepting a gay lifestyle. A number of Kinship leaders and other known homosexuals have been disfellowshipped. One local church considering accepting the transfer of an openly practicing gay member from another Adventist congregation was told by its conference committee that it would almost certainly be dropped from the sisterhood of churches if it accepted the gay member into its fellowship. "Let them (homosexuals) worship somewhere else. We don't want them here," protested a leading layman in a local church. "If the church ever votes to approve homosexual relationships, I'm getting out," said a conference officer.

Certainly the consciousness of the church has been raised to recognize the fact that a significant number of its members and former members are gay Christians who

have a love for the church and who would like to be Adventists.

It is fair to say also that in the question of the morality of loving, committed homosexual relationships, all the good arguments aren't on one side. Careful students

on both sides concede freely that the subject is exceedingly complex and deserves patient and prayerful investigation. Whether or not the issue ever is finally settled, it will be impossible any longer to keep the question in a closet.

## Growing Up Gay Adventist

*In August 1980, six delegates accredited by the General Conference, including three seminary professors and two pastors, attended a camp meeting at Payson, Arizona, sponsored by SDA Kinship, an organization serving and representing homosexual Adventists. At one meeting the delegates asked Kinship members to tell their personal stories. "Growing Up Gay Adventist" contains excerpts from the accounts, here set down anonymously, of 10 of the 40 members attending. These accounts were chosen to be representative of the whole group.*

*The membership of Kinship is growing rapidly, now numbering over 300. There are perhaps 20,000 homosexuals with Adventist backgrounds in the U.S. (The number may well be higher: There is reason to think that conservative religious groups, such as Adventists, produce a higher proportion of homosexuals than average.) Many, perhaps the majority, leave the church, finding it too inhospitable an environment. (Half the Kinship members at the camp meeting no longer were attending Adventist churches, though most of these attended other churches such as "Metropolitan Community Churches," which have a particular ministry to homosexuals.) But many others continue in the church, some being very "closeted," even going so far as to bow to pressures to marry in*

*order to remain hidden; others now live openly and even win their friends to the church. According to Kinship leaders, a significant minority of their members are very active in the church, to the point, indeed, of holding various offices.*

*— The Editors*

**S**peaker One: I do not ever remember having any sexual attraction toward women at all. As far back as I can remember, I always looked at men and was sexually attracted to them. For a long time, I did not really know the term for someone like me. I did not really know that much about sexuality when I arrived in academy. In my junior year there was a special class in sociology. It was in that class that I learned the name of what I apparently really and truly was. It was not until college, when I took several psychology and sociology classes, that I really began to understand it and began to do some reading on it. However, I never did anything about it sexually as far as actually being with another man until quite some time later. In both academy and college, I had felt several times like going and talking to someone, but I de-