

Group reaches out to black gay Christians

Conference aims to draw believers back to church without vilifying their lifestyle

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By Rebecca Rosen Lum

Black gay and lesbian believers must look to a new generation of religious leaders if they want to participate fully in church life.

That is the message of "Souls A' Fire 3," a conference in Philadelphia sponsored by the Pacific School of Religion's Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies this weekend.

Too many pastors "are stuck in their thinking," said Johari Jabir, coordinator of the center's African American Roundtable. "We're trying to intervene earlier in the thinking of young leaders."

To be gay, Christian and black is to live a double life -- and to be vilified by the institution that has infused African-Americans with a deep sense of home, presenters said in a telephone news conference that preceded "Souls A' Fire 3."

A high-powered debate has erupted over support for same-sex marriage, drawing in such leaders as the Bishop Harry Jackson Jr., the Rev. Al Sharpton, and the Rev. Michael Eric Dyson.

In 2004, about 15 Oakland ministers loudly declared their support of President Bush's proposed constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage.

"You began to see more messages coming across the pulpit slamming (gays and lesbians) as unholy," said the Rev. Ann Jefferson, worship director and program coordinator of the Certificate of Ministry Studies Program at Pacific School of Religion.

The issue is broader than the same-sex question, Jefferson and other presenters said.

"For so many years, African-American LGBT people have been making contributions to the life of faith and religion and congregations and communities," she said.

"But often, our gifts have been ... exploited, if you will: Bring your gifts, but be silent about who you are and how you really move in the world."

Jefferson left the church she served as youth minister and minister of music after coming out as gay to the pastor and co-director of music.

Their message to her: "If you keep yourself open to healing from this sinful existence, you can remain, but you certainly can't be a part of the leadership here."

The first Souls A' Fire took place in Berkeley, the second in Chicago. This year, the conference dovetails with Philadelphia's Gay Black Pride Day.

Coincidentally, one month ago, the National Black Justice Coalition held its second annual conference there.

Former NBA player John Amaechi spoke about coming out as gay and finding a spiritual rapprochement.

The attendees also heard from Jackson, Senior Pastor of Hope Christian Church in the Washington, D.C., area and bishop in the Fellowship of International Churches. He condemned "the gay lifestyle" and promiscuity, which he said have devastated African-American families.

Along with discussing how to minister to the HIV-infected, how to create gay or gay-inclusive congregations, and how to interpret scripture, Black Justice also focused on the importance of mentoring young people.

"There is an urgent need for the kind of service we provide, (especially) to a younger audience," said Alvin Quamina, managing director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies.

"We're focusing on young seminarians. There's not a lot of training out there."

Fourteen percent of the same-sex couples in the United States are black, and gay and lesbian black families are more likely to include children than other races, according to a 2005 analysis of Census data by the National Black Justice Coalition and the National Gay & Lesbian Task Force.

The year before, a Pew Forum survey found 64 percent of black respondents opposed same-sex marriage.

The Philadelphia presenters held high hopes young seminarians will telegraph a different message.

"It's sort of the Harriet Tubman notion that once you get free, you go back and make sure others can experience that same freedom," said the Rev. Cedric Harmon, co-pastor of the City of Refuge in Washington, D.C., "and can live in the fullness of all that God creates you to be."