

Queers seeking political and social acceptance have often found opposition in the Christian right wing. At the same time, there are many progressive Christian denominations that are welcoming and affirming to their queer congregants. While some Christians have a firm conservative agenda that rejects homosexuality, others identify a need for dialogue to mend divisions and find reconciliation.

One of the fundamental blocks in place between queers and conservative Christians is a staunch belief that homosexuality is a sin. But according to faith leaders, all sins are equal in the eyes of God, which means all sinners are equal, too.

Queer African Americans sometimes find themselves ostracized because of their community's prevalent Christian beliefs. With a nod to Black History Month, *Just Out* spoke with two African Americans about this long-standing debate.

The Rev. Renee Ward, executive director and founder of Chrysalis Ministries, discussed her perceptions of the complexities of Christianity and homosexuality. Her story is profiled in a documentary, *Who Will Speak for Me*, about the lives of Pacific Northwest residents who are affected by HIV/AIDS and the role of religion in HIV/AIDS education, prevention and support. Ward lost her husband, Joseph, to AIDS in 1998.

Although Ward says she does not promote discrimination of gays or any minority, she doesn't believe being Christian and gay is possible.

"You're trying to put a square peg in a round hole," Ward says. "You're trying to have homosexuality assimilate into the Christian faith system, and that will never happen. It's an absolute."

This absolute comes from God's disapproval of alternative lifestyles, as outlined in the Bible, according to Ward.

"I believe there are gays who love Jesus, but when you fall under the umbrella of the Christian faith, there's no lighter word for it than an abomination, violations of principles required by God," Ward says.

CHRISTIAN AND GAY: FINDING A WAY

Alisa Simmons is on the board of Basic Rights Oregon, the state's largest queer advocacy nonprofit agency. She says being a lesbian and a Christian are not in conflict for her. She and many others have found solace in their church and faith during trying times for sexual minorities.

Simmons was brought up as a West Indian Baptist. Her mother lives in Trinidad, where oppression toward gays is prevalent. When she was outed to her mother less than two years ago, she consulted her family's spiritual guide.

THEOLOGY AND HOMOSEXUALITY

Can the clash between conservative Christians and queers be mended?

by Jaymee R. Cuti

"He said, 'Alisa, we are all God's children, and don't let anyone ever tell you anything different.' That was the first acceptance within that culture for me, and I've been able to breathe so much easier since then," says Simmons.

Simmons says the need for basic protections supersedes the need for marriage equality.

"We're talking about discrimination and a fight for equal rights, which we clearly don't have. I think it's pathetic in 2005, we have the same bill, the Basic Fairness Act, before the Oregon Legislature. It's the same bill that has been introduced for 30 years," she says. "Take marriage off the table. This is another struggle for being recognized as full human beings, to have what everyone else has: basic protections under the law."

Simmons notes that Ward's argument about the incompatibility of homosexuality and Christianity does not make sense to her.

"Of course we fit. We're here, and we're good Christians. I love Christianity and think it's a beautiful way to live," she says.

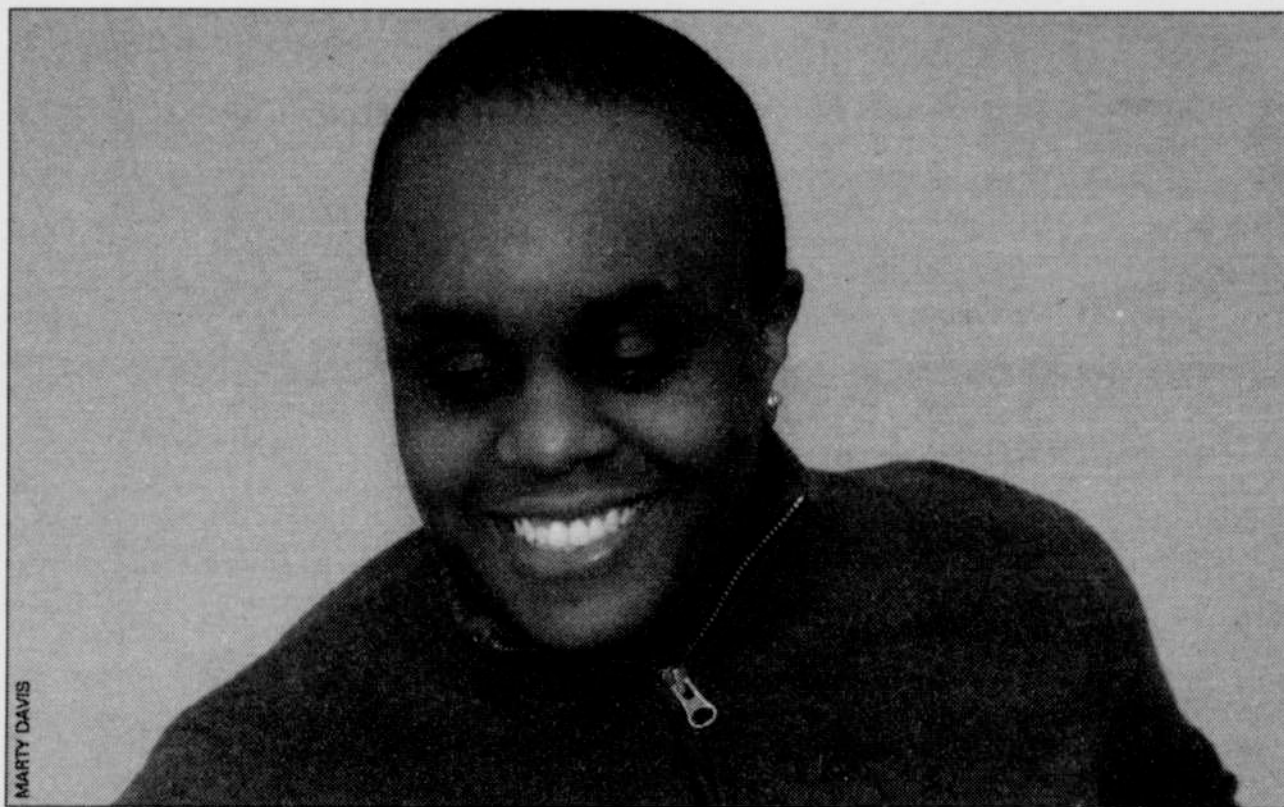
Simmons says she sees churches as havens,

historically, for political outcasts. Progressive movements during the civil rights era burgeoned from the teachings of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. inside Baptist churches.

Ward agrees that churches have a place in politics.

"We can't put our faith in man, but we can put our faith in God. God is unwavering, but laws aren't. They're manmade," she says.

Ward sees the religious and political overlap in issues such as prayer in schools, racial profiling and possibly stem cell research.



Alisa Simmons, a board member for Basic Rights Oregon, says her Christian faith and sexuality are not in conflict



The Rev. Renee Ward ponders the complexities of Christianity and homosexuality at Little Chapel of the Chimes in Northeast Portland

But same-sex marriage has acted as a strong divide between Christians and queers.

"When you're using the word marriage, I can't accept that. Marriage is a principle founded in the Bible," says Ward, who is conflicted about civil unions.

"I wish there was a way to accommodate," Ward says. "If we had to call it civil unions, fine. From a legal standpoint, if that will protect them, fine, but I would not perform a union ceremony because of my principles."

Ward is launching a new church, Zion Christian Methodist Episcopal, on Easter Sunday, March 27, in the Hollywood district. She says all are welcome.

"I'm excited, and I want everyone to come. You have gifts just like everyone else. God is the judge. I can only share with you what the Scripture says and what's in writing that God has said," says Ward. "I know what it's like to have doors close in your face because of fear, misunderstanding and hate, but I also know about forgiveness and how hearts can be changed." J

"I'm AVAILABLE
when *you* are!"

Careful and energetic handling of
all your home financing needs

**MORTGAGE
Advocates**

6700 SW 105th Ave., Suite 200 Beaverton, OR 97005
Toll Free (877) 826-9900 Fax (503) 297-0824
E-Mail: colleenw@mtgadvocates.com www.mtgadvocates.com

Colleen Weed

Office 503•297•9900

Cell 503•780•1561



"He who hesitates is a
damn fool." -Mae West

JOHNNY S O L E

A WORLD OF FINE SHOES FOR MEN AND WOMEN.
815 SW ALDER STREET PORTLAND OR 97205 503-225-1241
MON-SAT 11 AM TO 6 PM SUN 12 PM TO 5 PM