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Compassionate Bigotry

Kinder, gentler discrimination revealed at the Love Won Out conference

by Jaymee R. Cuti

*Homosexuals can be nice people.
 They can form loving relationships
 and be good parents.
 Gays and lesbians should be treated
 with respect and dignity.*

These were "givens" I had not expected to hear when I registered for Focus on the Family's Love Won Out conference Aug. 4 at City Bible Church in Northeast Portland. The Colorado-based organization has a reputation for praying the gay away and converting queers to a Christian and, most importantly, hetero life.

I paid the \$60 and registered under a slight variation of my name. With all the attention I put into dressing inconspicuously, I thought I'd blow my cover as the press or, at the very least, a nonbeliever, when the bag search revealed my camera and Harry Potter novel.

"I won't tell you how it ends," said the volunteer to my relief.

But the warm smiles that delivered welcomes were soon countered by another slate of "givens" with a judgmental tone.

God does not make people gay.

The gay gene is a myth.

Homosexuals are working to show every institution—education, the media, business, government—that they are normal.

That last one might be true.

The daylong conference was couched in messages of kindness. A woman, later revealed to be the mother of hasbian Anne Heche, shared a personal story about forgiving her deceitful husband who died of AIDS. He had been leading a double life as a gay man. I learned that she desired to be more like the forgiving father in *The Prodigal Son*. Nancy Heche prayed that God would heal her heart that broke when she received the phone

message from Anne, announcing that she'd fallen in love with a woman named Ellen.

Another surprising admission came from lecturer Bill Maier, a Focus on the Family radio program host. He said the church had fallen short on condemning anti-gay violence and speaking out often against hate crimes.

But this method of kinder, gentler bigotry failed to convey acceptance of gay and lesbian people. Never did the message stray far from the warning that homosexuals would experience pain and suffering because they defied God.

Perhaps you can't spot a gay by his or her hairstyle, but laps around the sanctuary and lingering at the coffee cart revealed that many of the 150 conference attendees were churchgoing married couples ranging in age from 30s to 60s. It was my highest hope that few gays were in the pews, hearing the message that self-denial could lead them to a fulfilling, hetero life.

After a group session, the conference broke into workshops. Topics included "Someone I Love Is Gay," "Hope for Those Who Struggle" and "The Pro-Gay Agenda in Schools."

I high-tailed it to a popular workshop, "Straight Thinking on Gay Marriage," led by Maier. Filled with approximately 50 people in the church's chapel, this was the only workshop repeated in the morning and afternoon.

It also served as a reunion of sorts for those who had protested House Bill 2007, the domestic partnership law, in Salem three months ago. Before the program began, old buddies updated each other on their signature-gathering efforts to refer the law to the 2008 ballot.

In a pseudo-academic presentation, listeners learned how same-sex marriage threatened their families. Maier enlightened the crowd about polyamory. He presented a Netherlandic study where married gay men admitted to eight extramarital sexual contacts in an 18-month period.



More than 100 people attended the Love Won Out "ex-gay" conference at City Bible Church.

JAYMEE R. CUTI