

# **Gays Ask Clergy For Public Support - N.C. Pride members say they want churches and synagogues to start talking about their positions on homosexuality**

**by Margaret Moffett Banks, staff writer**

Reprinted from the Greensboro News & Record, May 21, 1999

<http://www.greensboro.com>

A gay and lesbian group is calling on religious leaders to sign a statement saying their church welcomes openly homosexual people. Members of N.C. Pride, a gay and lesbian organization, mailed letters this week to more than 500 churches and synagogues in Greensboro and a few in Winston-Salem, asking for signatures on a Statement of Welcome. The statement invites homosexuals to consider membership in their churches and pledges acceptance of its members, regardless of their sexual orientation. Four religious leaders in Greensboro already have signed the statement: the Rev. Christine Oscar of St. Mary's Metropolitan Community Church; the Rev. Charles Hawes, chaplain of St. Mary's House, UNCG's Episcopal/Anglican Campus and Community Center; Rabbi Fred Guttman of Temple Emanuel; and the Rev. Barbara Cooke of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greensboro. The letter was mailed by N.C. Pride's Building Bridges Committee, which works to end violence and scapegoating of homosexuals, according to N.C. Pride. One of the committee's members, Mary Louise Smith of Greensboro, said she wants the letter to get people talking about gays and lesbians who are in the religious community, something she thinks hasn't happened enough.

"This silence is a very devastating thing," said Smith, who is a member of New Garden Friends Meeting in Greensboro. "I don't think heterosexuals understand how hurtful this is. Some people are living their lives in the shadows by not being affirmed for who they are."

N.C. Pride offers to send guest speakers, pamphlets and videos to churches and temples before the congregations decide whether to sign the statement. The group is planning its annual three-day festival in Greensboro on June 11-13.

Authors of the letter say they realize the statement is both strong and public, and not all churches will feel comfortable signing it. But support for their cause, one N.C. Pride member said, will send a message that Greensboro is a welcoming and courageous religious community.

"I think people of faith are called to live their lives in courage and truth," said Susan Parker, who lives in Winston-Salem. Parker said she has first-hand knowledge of what can happen when a church refuses to affirm homosexual members. When she was 16, the pastor of her Baptist church in western North Carolina confronted her about her sexuality. Parker said he made it clear that God wouldn't love her if she were gay.

"That's a devastating thing to hear when you've been to every church service at a church for the first 16 years of your life," she said. Guttman, from Temple Emanuel, said the Statement of Welcome was in line with Reform Judaism, which supports extending marital rights and insurance benefits to same-sex couples. He said he was motivated to sign the statement because of the killing of Matthew Shepard, the gay University of Wyoming student beaten because of his

sexuality.

"No matter what a person's sexual preference, we are all children of God," Guttman said. "N.C. Pride is trying to help us understand that."