

# Church reaches out to gays

## Ex-seminarian rekindles faith at new mission

By Gail Lethbridge  
STAFF REPORTER

When J.J. Lyon entered the seminary to become a Roman Catholic priest 34 years ago, he was told to leave because he is gay.

Devastated by the experience, the 18-year-old was left feeling worthless as a person and abandoned by his religion. His faith in God was unshaken, but his commitment to organized religion dissolved immediately and for the next three decades he languished in a spiritual vacuum.

He rediscovered his need for a spiritual outlet some 25 years later when he found himself battling a problem with alcohol.

"I realized that I had to find some way of worshipping that was not going to make me feel like some kind of a third-class citizen," he said.

Lyon, like many homosexuals and lesbians, always felt excluded by mainstream Christian churches which he believes lack an understanding for the spiritual needs of people with different sexual preferences.

So when he found a church that welcomes the homosexual community and other disaffected groups in society, he was overjoyed.

Lyon has resumed his religious studies at the Atlantic School of Theology in the hope of becoming a pastor in the Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Church.

For the past year Lyon and a small group from Halifax have been working to establish the first Nova Scotian congregation of Metropolitan Community Church. In September, their efforts were rewarded when the small Halifax-based project was granted its mission status.

When the church has built up sufficient numbers, it will receive full status as a Metropolitan Community Church, which will make it one of 264 congregations in 16 countries around the world.

Now known in Halifax as the Safe Harbour Community Church, the small congregation of about 18 meets each Sunday night in the Brunswick Street United Church



Bob Smith/Clark Photographic

**Theology student J. J. Lyon is helping to set up a ministry of the Metropolitan Community Church, which welcomes lesbians and gays, in Halifax.**

for a service and a social.

Lyon says the Metropolitan Community Church and its fledgling Halifax ministry are founded on the premise that all Christians have a right to belong as an equal member to a spiritual community, regardless of their sexual preferences or physical handicaps.

"We work very hard at being inclusive," Lyon says. "Many people have been excluded from full worship through no fault of their own. I don't just mean because of (sexual) orientation. How many churches provide signing for the deaf and still use phrases like 'please stand?'"

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In welcoming homosexuals, the theology of the church strays from that of mainline churches which use biblical references to condemn and exclude homosexuality.

The Metropolitan Community Church interprets the Bible's writings on homosexuality in an historical context. Lyon says passages which state that men are not supposed to sleep with men have been used by many de-

nominations to define homosexuality, but no reference is ever made to lesbians.

At the time these passages were written, Lyon says, many pagan cults engaged in prostitution as part of their worship ritual. Heterosexual men sold themselves to other heterosexual men in the belief that the ensuing sexual encounters proved their adoration for their God. The Metropolitan Community Church believes the biblical writings were a condemnation of these unnatural acts and do not refer to homosexual relationships born of natural desire.

But the modern Roman Catholic Church, for example, applies these writings to homosexuals and considers homosexuality as a sin. Gay adherents to the religion are required to practise celibacy.

"It's considered a sin and you would have to cover up what you are doing," Lyon says. "You would never be acknowledged as a couple, you would have no status, you'd have no acceptance."

That reality seemed unchristian to Troy Perry, the church's founder who wrote a book entitled *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*. In it, he made the point that homosexuality should not be grounds for exclusion from full participation in Christian life.

"The theology of Metropolitan Community Church is that God is our creator and that Christ is our model and without action to correct social injustice, there cannot be Christian life," Lyon says.

He says Christ was very much a radical who spending much of his time with marginalized people and constantly fought the establishment and injustice.

By his example, the Metropolitan Community Church conducts an outreach program of social justice concentrating on areas of poverty, the homeless and racial inequality.

Lyon says a letter explaining Safe Harbour Community Church will be drafted and sent to churches of all denominations in metro to explain the concept. Lyon hopes that pastors will use the new denomination as a resource and refer church members experiencing difficulties in traditional settings.