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## For Some Black Pastors, Accepting Gay Members Means Losing Others

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

ATLANTA — When the Rev. Dennis Meredith of Tabernacle Baptist Church here began preaching acceptance of gay men and lesbians a few years ago, he attracted some gay people who were on the brink of suicide and some who had left the Baptist faith of their childhoods but wanted badly to return.

At the same time, Tabernacle Baptist, an African-American congregation, lost many of its most loyal, generous parishioners, who could not accept a message that contradicted what they saw as the Bible's condemnation of same-sex relations. Over the last three years, Tabernacle's Sunday attendance shrank to 800, from 1,100.

The debate about homosexuality that has roiled predominantly white mainline churches for years has gradually seeped into African-American congregations, threatening their unity, finances and, in some cases, their existence.

In St. Paul, the Rev. Oliver White, senior minister of Grace Community Church, lost nearly all his 70 congregants after he voted in 2005 to support the blessing of same-sex unions in his denomination, the United Church of Christ.

In the Atlanta area, a hub of African-American life, only a few black churches have preached acceptance of gay men and lesbians, Mr. Meredith said. At one of those congregations, Victory Church in Stone Mountain, attendance on Sundays has fallen to 3,000 people, from about 6,000 four or five years ago, said the Rev. Kenneth L. Samuel, the senior pastor.

Some black ministers, like their white counterparts, said they had been moved to reconsider biblical passages about same-sex relations by personal events, like finding out

that a friend or relative is gay. Some members of the clergy contend that because of the antipathy to gay men and lesbians, black churches have done little to address the high rate of [H.I.V.](#) infection among African-Americans.

“The church has to come to a point when it has to embrace all the people Jesus embraced, and that means the people in the margins,” Dr. Samuel said. “It really bothered my congregation when I said that as people of color who have been ostracized, marginalized, how can we turn around now and oppress other people?”

It is hard to know how many ministers who lead the country’s tens of thousands of African-American congregations are preaching acceptance of gay men and lesbians. Some leading African-American religious thinkers and leaders — like [Cornel West](#), the Rev. Peter J. Gomes and the Rev. Michael Eric Dyson — have called for inclusion of gay men and lesbians. But other leaders are convinced that the Bible condemns homosexuality and that tolerance of gay men and lesbians is a yet another dangerous force buffeting the already fragile black family.

“It is one of several factors that are taking away the interest in traditional marriage in the African-American community,” said Bishop Harry R. Jackson Jr., the president of the High Impact Leadership Coalition, a black conservative Christian group. “I see the growing gay movement in the black community and our culture as almost evangelistic in nature, with what’s on television, with their legal agenda, all those things that have made homosexuality more acceptable.”

In the 13 years Mr. Meredith has led Tabernacle Baptist, he has presided over cycles of fraying and mending, this last time because of his preaching “love and acceptance,” he said. When he arrived in 1994, the congregation at Tabernacle had dwindled from several thousand members to about 110.

A compelling orator with the voice and showmanship of a stadium-rock star, Mr. Meredith quickly began to draw more new members. He preached against homosexuality. Then, five years ago, his middle son, Micah, told him that he is gay. Mr. Meredith and his wife began to read liberal theologians like Mr. Gomes and to look at Scripture again. What matters most in the Bible, Mr. Meredith said, was Jesus’ injunction to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself, and that includes gay men and lesbians.

As he preached greater acceptance of gay people, Mr. Meredith saw the face of his congregation change.

About three years ago, many older members, those who had hung on through the church's waning, and who drove in from the suburbs because they had attended Tabernacle as young people, gradually began to leave. They took with them their generous, loyal tithing. The 90-year-old church had money to cover salaries and utilities but had a hard time paying for properties it had bought nearby. In September, Mr. Meredith held a commitment ceremony in the church for two lesbian couples. More people left after that.

As attendance dropped, the church cut back to one service on Sunday, from two. On a recent Sunday, the pews were filled with some older people like the deacons and deaconesses, though the head deacon had left recently after telling Mr. Meredith that he had turned Tabernacle into "a sissy church."

Under banners that read "Kindness," "Peace" and "Love," there were young families with babies. And there were transgender people like Stacy Jackson and Nikki Brown. There were also lesbian couples like Angela Hutchins and Stephanie Champion, sitting together in the front rows.

Mr. Meredith preached about Moses, about the vision God gave him to do the right thing. He told congregants about holding on to that vision, regardless of who they were.

"Don't let anyone tell you you can't do it because of your lifestyle, because of your sexuality, because you don't have an education, because you've done time," he said. "Because God knew you before you were born, when you were still in your mother's womb. If God loves everybody, who am I not to love everybody?"

"Amen," people called out. "Preach it; preach it."

Afterward, when the sanctuary was mostly empty, Ruth Jinks, a deaconess who has been at Tabernacle since 1969, sat in a pew, cane by her side, waiting for the church van to take her home. Gay men and lesbians do not make her uncomfortable, Ms. Jinks said. They have always been in black churches, under something of a "don't ask, don't tell" policy. But she seems to have tired of Mr. Meredith's mention of them. She hears from acquaintances that she goes to the "gay church."

“I don’t think you need to be speaking about it from the pulpit all the time,” said Ms. Jinks, who is in her early 80s. “I joined this church; I support this church. I didn’t join a minister. I’m planning on staying here and will not let people run me away.”

One of the junior pastors is the Rev. Chris Brown, who grew up in a black Pentecostal church in Montgomery, Ala.

“My pastor in Alabama said gays had three rights: to redeem themselves, to repent or to die of AIDS,” said Mr. Brown, 32.

He added, “The African-American church thinks AIDS is a gay disease, and that everyone who got it deserved to.”

DeMarcus Hill, 32, said he admired Mr. Meredith’s “ability to embrace those people who everyone had rejected.” Mr. Hill once attended and worked at Tabernacle Baptist, and he is still friends with the Meredith family. But after reading the Bible closely, Mr. Hill, who is studying to be ordained as a Baptist minister, said he could not stay at Tabernacle because sex outside heterosexual marriage was not countenanced.

Mr. Hill said he agreed with Mr. Meredith that God loves everyone, including gay men and lesbians. “But God corrects you because he loves you,” he said, explaining that for gay Christians, such a correction would probably mean lifelong celibacy or eventually being with someone of the opposite sex.