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## ***Eastern Mattachine Magazine,***

June 1965, Vol. X, No. 5

### **Homosexuals Confer with Clergy**

**By Warren D. Adkins**

(pseudonym for Jack Nichols)

A conference of major importance took place at the American University in Washington, D. C., on March 22, 1965. Representatives of The Mattachine Society of Washington met with eleven clergymen of the Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faiths. The first of its kind in the Eastern part of the country, this conference successfully opened a dialogue between the homosexual and religious communities in Washington. A continuing series of such conferences has been planned.

Appearing as individuals, the following clergymen were present: Rabbi Laszlo Berkowitz; The Reverend Tibor Chikes, Professor of Pastoral Care at Wesley Theological Seminary, Congregationalist; The Reverend Barry Evans, Priest at St. Stephen and the Incarnation Episcopal Church; The Reverend Leroy S. Graham, Methodist Chaplain, American University; Reverend John F. Harvey, Instructor in Moral Theology DeSalles Hall, Hyattsville, Maryland, Roman Catholic; The Reverend Berkley C. Hathorne, Director of the Washington Pastoral Counseling Service, Methodist; The Reverend Ernest O. Martin, Pastor of the Church of the Holy City, Swedenborgian; Reverend M. Frank Ruppert, Priest at St. Matthews Roman Catholic Cathedral; The Reverend William Stremel, Lutheran; The Reverend David Voss, Presbyterian; and The Reverend C. Dale White, Director of the Department of Social Health of the General Board of Christian Social Concerns of the Methodist Church. Unitarian ministers who had defended the civil liberties of homosexuals from their Washington area pulpits had been scheduled to be present, but were marching with The Reverend Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama.

The conference was opened by Robert King, President of the M. S. W., who greeted the clergymen. Also attending were Warren D. Adkins, Secretary of the M. S. W., and the chairman of the Committee on Religious Concerns; Mrs. Gail Johnson, M.S.W. Treasurer; Franklin E. Kameny, Ph. D., M.S.W.'s founder and past president; and Richard Wilkins, chairman of the Referral Service Committee,

Dr. Kameny opened the dialogue by explaining the purpose of the conference and the M.S.W.'s approach to the question of homosexuality and religion. He made it clear that by integration of homosexuals into the religious community M.S.W. means acceptance of homosexuals as homosexuals not as candidates for change or "cure". Dr. Kameny told of the the newly adopted M.S.W. policy statement which states that homosexuality, per se, is neither a sickness, disturbance, or other pathology, but is rather a preference, orientation or propensity, fully on par with, and not different in kind from heterosexuality. He explained that the purpose of the meeting was to accomplish two major aims: (1) to remedy the alienation and estrangement now existing between the homosexual and the religious community and the religious community and (2) to enlist the aid of the clergy in both the homosexual's fight for his civil liberties and human rights, and in his effort to eliminate the adverse discrimination he faces.

Warren D. Adkins, acting as conference chairman, gave a

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short history of what religious groups have done to face the question of homosexuality. He reviewed the work of Quakers, Episcopalians, Methodists, Catholics, Jewish groups, Unitarians and Congregationalists, and told of the cooperation achieved between homophile organizations and clergymen both in Washington and in other sections of the country. The establishment of the Council on Religion and the he said, is one of the important steps which has taken place to effect communication between the religious and communities. Ministers belonging to this Council invited homosexuals, as such, to participate in their church activities,

The general discussion which followed was vigorous indeed! The clergymen agreed that there was much work to be done to integrate homosexuals into the religious community. They were decidedly in favor of doing such work. Their approach to the question of homosexuality varied widely, however, even within denominational frameworks,

One clergyman began by saying that if the homosexual is eliminated from the church, he himself is primarily responsible since the church does not take a stand against homosexuals.

Other clergymen disagreed and pointed out that there has been little or no church response to the question of homosexuality because of a general consensus that there is nothing to say. Only in recent years has there been a new shift by the clergy in the behavioral sciences and in pastoral counseling. Formerly, said one clergyman, homosexual was considered a dirty word. The churches have been guilty of silence and self righteousness. Homosexuality has labeled a sin, and homosexuals, as persons, have been accorded only limited acceptance. A few clergymen pointed out that homosexuality is flatly condemned in the Bible, all themselves did not condemn homosexuals as persons.

The clergymen stated that they were decidedly civil liberties for the homosexual citizen. They also expressed support for equal employment opportunities.

The M. S. W. representatives gave specific examples stating to the assembled clergymen why homosexuals feel alienated from the religious community. Reading a hostile letter to the M.S.W. from Dr. Frederick Brown Harris, Chaplain of the United States Senate, Mr. Adkins explained how this letter was a classic example of views typifying the vicious and hardened attitudes with which some ministers greet the homosexual. Dr. Kameny noted that in the individual's conflict between religion and his homosexuality, religion most often lost the battle to the force of the sexual orientation. There would be no further problem, Mr. King continued, if the battle were to end with the homosexual's rejection of religion, but the conflict is not resolved, and the problems persist. Mrs. Johnson challenged clergymen to accept known homosexuals as Sunday school teachers if they wished to test the reality of discrimination and ostracism.

The pertinent fact about the men assembled at this conference was that they all wished to continue the dialogue. They wanted free intellectual exchange between the homosexual community and the religious community so that understanding from both sides would increase. Whether they regarded homosexuality as an eradicable aspect of the personalities of a large minority, or as a neurosis or disturbance, or as a question about which they had not made up their minds, there was on their faces, and in their words a genuine respect for all human beings as brothers and as children of God. There was no spirit of harsh rejection, no refusal to listen, no fierce condemnation. The Catholic priests made it clear that homosexual acts, as such, are not

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condoned. This did not mean, however, that homosexual people are not fully children of God as are heterosexuals. And, neither did it mean that we can judge a man harshly if he acts homosexually. We cannot tell from an outsider's standpoint what strong forces lead a man or woman into overt homosexual relations. Some of the clergymen even felt that homosexuality might well be the best way of life for a given individual.

Only one clergyman sounded the bell of alarm at the activities of the M.S.W., expressing his worry that homophile organizations would use clergymen as propaganda weapons and distort their views in order to set homosexuality in a favorable light. This clergyman, however, went on record in a positive fashion by declaring his opposition to the persecution of homosexuals,

An honest start was made in the journey toward greater understanding. There was unanimous agreement that communication must be continued and expanded. A tentative date for reconvening was set six weeks hence. As the conference closed, M.S.W. representatives thanked the clergymen for their participation. New hopes had been aroused and possibilities conceived.