



## Faith & Values

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 26, 2002

### One for all

If homosexuals love God, the church should welcome them says the Rev. Steven Kindle

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Many Christians believe that homosexuality is a grave sin and that the Bible condemns it wholeheartedly.

But this teaching is not only wrong, it's deadly, in the Rev. Steven Kindle's view.

"If you think that God hates non-heterosexuals, you have no problem dismissing them or feeling unsympathetic toward their abuse," the minister said. "And if you're crazy enough, you might engage in abusing people yourself."

The Rev. Kindle is the executive director of Clergy United for the Equality of Homosexuals, a Santa Barbara-based organization that wants to eliminate the "spiritual abuse of homosexuals" perpetrated by church teachings, he said.

The ministry provides consulting services and seminars which offer a Christian worldview that affirms homosexuality and seeks to put an end to homophobia, much as activists in the church fought against racism during the Civil Rights era.

With a grant from the Santa Barbara Foundation,

the Rev. Kindle is leading a four-hour seminar Nov. 2, "Beyond the Bible and Homosexuality: A Journey into the Heart of God," at First Congregational Church in Santa Barbara. He hopes that clergy and lay people who come to the seminar feeling conflicted will leave feeling certain that they can accept homosexuality in themselves, their friends, their children and fellow congregation members, while remaining true to the Christian faith.

Homosexuality remains one of the most controversial issues in the church today, with many denominations struggling over acceptance of gay parishioners and clergy, and whether or not to recognize gay partnerships. For most conservative Christians, homosexuality remains a forbidden activity, while many liberal Protestant denominations have publicly become "open and affirming" and perform same-sex ceremonies.

In his seminars, the Rev. Kindle reviews how Christians have justified homophobia through the Scriptures, and then debunks those argument using scholarly Biblical interpretations that take into account the historical and contextual issues. The Bible was written some 2,000 years ago, and doesn't necessarily mean exactly what it says, he points out.

"The most difficult task we have in reading the Bible is understanding that it can't be read in the same way we read the News-Press on Saturday mornings," he noted.

His seminars include the teaching of a Christ-centered theology of inclusion, and he shows how churches -- knowingly and unknowingly -- can cause spiritual harm to gay and lesbian people through their interpretation of the Gospel. The minister said his aim is to offer a liberating interpretation of Scripture and to help churches and their members draw closer together in God by pursuing justice and equality for gay men and lesbians.

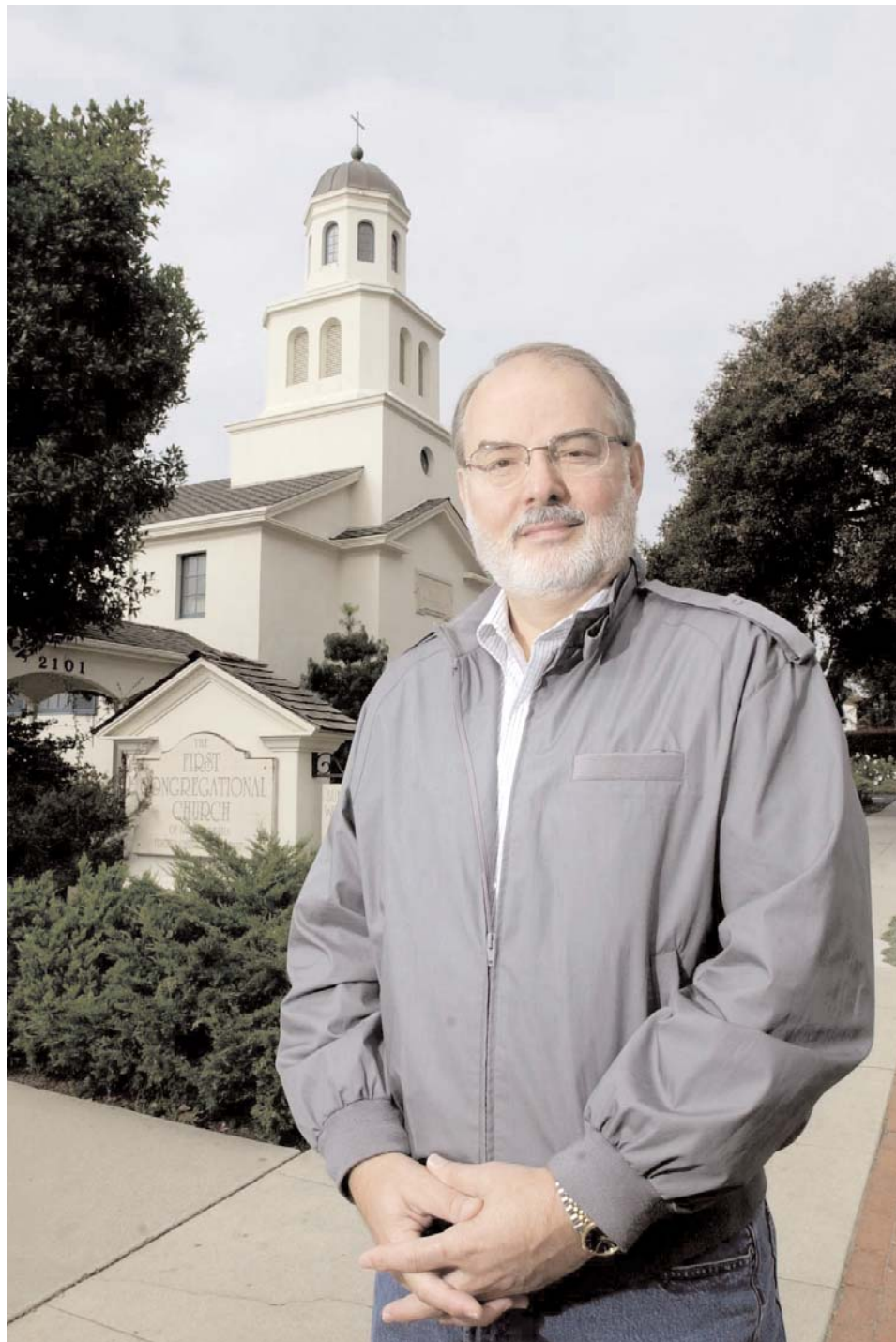
"People can't believe that a white, straight, married man can be involved in this issue without there being some family or friend issue, some crisis or some hidden agenda propelling him," said the Rev. Kindle, who is ordained by the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). "But the fact is that the Gospel of Christ demands that I be involved in this way. The purpose of the Christian life is to help us learn how to love as Jesus loved, and for me that means accepting all people."

He doesn't expect that ministers and churchgoers who vehemently

disagree with him will come to the seminar, although he said he is interested in dialogue with them: "I would like to help them see that what they are saying in the pulpit and what they are teaching in their Sunday schools kills people. This enrages them because they don't see the harm. But the connection is clear, even in our own community," with the murder in February of Clinton Risetter, a gay man who was set on fire while he slept.

Some conservative Christian ministries which have scorned homosexuals in the past and have attempted to convert them to heterosexuality are taking a less strident stance on the issue these days, said the Rev. Kindle, who attended recent seminars offered by Focus on the Family, Love Won Out and Exodus International. These groups are now lovingly reaching out to gays and lesbians with offers to help them avoid the temptation of acting on their homosexual impulses.

"The message used to be, 'Freedom from homosexuality through Jesus Christ,' said the minister, a member of First Christian Church in Santa Barbara. "Now it's 'Come and join us in our shared misery as sinners.' Many of these groups agree with me that the church has related abysmally to non-heterosexuals and caused much harm, and they



STEVE MALONE/NEWS-PRESS

The Rev. Steven Kindle, executive director of Clergy United for the Equality of Homosexuals, will lead a seminar Nov. 2 on accepting homosexuality as a Christian.

have worked hard to teach their people that this is wrong," he said. "But as heartfelt as that is, the result is still the same: unless you stop, you're condemned. My understanding of the Bible is that they need do neither, as God affirms them in their sexuality."

That day will come, he said. Just as white ministers in the South at one time used the Bible to defend slavery and now reject it, so too will most Christians come to view homophobia as contrary to the teachings of Jesus, he said.

Educated at a fundamentalist Christian college, Harding University in Searcy, Ark., the Rev. Kindle once held disparaging views of homosexuals himself. But those views were challenged over the years by his professors, and he and his parishioners began to change.

"Intellectually, I began to discover that my original Biblical assumptions weren't accurate. And getting to know people in the gay community, I learned that many of my stereotypes about them were wrong, too," he said. Over a 15-year period, "I was made aware of the contributions that Christianity makes to maintaining homophobia, and the devastating effects it

has on people. But the journey out of homophobia and into affirmation doesn't happen overnight."

Three years ago, he gave up his job as a pastoral minister in Honolulu to pursue justice on behalf of homosexuals as his full-time ministry.

He was inspired to do so by a parishioner in his church, Dr. Rodney Powell, a highly respected civil rights worker who marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s. Dr. Powell is black and he is gay.

"He told me that churches are largely missing from the gay rights struggle, and that someone in the church has to bring them to it," said the Rev. Kindle. "He encouraged me."

Clergy United, a nonprofit organization, now has 100 members. Since the group is primarily driven by the laity, the Rev. Kindle said it may eventually undergo a name change. But its mission will remain the same.

"It's not enough to say that God loves homosexuals," he said. "God's love of homosexuals is affirming and nurturing, and God's heart breaks when lesbian and gay children are the victims of evil perpetuated in the name of God. The ultimate purpose is to stop the cycle that ends in murder."

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