Gay Couples Seek Unions in God's Eyes

By LAURIE GOODSTEIN

Jeffrey A. Manley found Jusak Y. Bernhard five years ago after posting a note in an online chat room for a Roman Catholic man looking to share his life with another Christian man.

This March, on the fifth anniversary of their first date, the two plan to exchange vows before their families and friends, in a church. They say they would not consider having the ceremony anywhere else.

"The reason we're doing this is to make God a part of the relationship," said Mr. Manley, a television editor who lives with Mr. Bernhard in Los Angeles. "We are making our union with God in public. We do see it as a sacrament."

Although 37 states have passed laws banning same-sex marriages, members of the clergy say they are seeing a growing number of religiously observant gay couples who are sidestepping the debate over legal rights and seeking to consecrate their unions in churches and synagogues.

These ceremonies bestow no legal or civil rights whatsoever. But the couples say they are seeking to have their relationships blessed not by the government, but by God.

Ministers and rabbis are responding to the demand. The United Church of Christ is holding workshops for ministers who want to learn how to handle gay unions. A rite for blessing gay couples that was developed by the Episcopal Church in New Westminster, British Columbia, is being shared by e-mail among ministers — including non-Episcopalians — who are looking for model liturgies.

Homosexuality has become the most divisive issue of the era for many religious denominations, and only a handful have decided to permit gay blessing ceremonies. Many prohibit them, while others are struggling to determine their stance. Although most denominations that do permit the ceremonies keep no nationwide records of how many same-sex rites have been performed, members of the clergy across the country said in interviews that the ceremonies were becoming more common in their churches and synagogues.

At the United Congregational Church in Worcester, Mass., for example, the
Rev. Terry Fitzgerald, senior minister, and the Rev. Mark Seifried, minister of education, said that of the 15 to 20 gay union ceremonies at their church in the last 15 years, 7 took place in 2003.

Rabbi Sharon Gladstone, who directs a center on sexual orientation issues at Hebrew Union College in Los Angeles, said, "I was ordained last year, and the first marriage I officiated at was a marriage of two women. I think that more and more rabbis are officiating, certainly in the Reform and Reconstructionist movements."

Even some members of the clergy who do not have the permission of their denominations — including Catholic priests — say they are quietly officiating at ceremonies in defiance of their church leaders.

One Catholic priest, who has violated his church's ban, said: "We can bless a dog, we can bless a boat, we can bless a car, but we can't say a prayer over two people who love each other and want to spend their lives together. You don't have to call it marriage; you can call it a deep and abiding friendship, but you can't bless it."

Although denominations that do permit these rituals formally refer to them as holy unions, same-sex blessings, covenants or commitment ceremonies, more and more of the couples and members of the clergy are simply calling them marriages. The services are often nearly identical to the marriage rites traditionally used for heterosexual couples.

"In most cases, we use the same vows and prayers, the same scriptural references," Ms. Fitzgerald said. "The only thing we change is that we say `partners' instead of `husband and wife.' "

Dolores M. Trzcinski, 49, and Marie T. Auger, 46, say they fulfilled a long-held dream when they walked down the aisle last year at the United Congregational Church in Worcester. They have lived together for more than 25 years.

"We never really cared about the state," said Ms. Trzcinski, a medical assistant in a doctor's office. "We didn't care about the health insurance. It was God's blessing that we wanted."

It is a perennial complaint among members of the clergy that many straight couples regard the chapel as little more than a stage set for a picture-perfect wedding. In contrast, many of the gay couples who are heading for the altar are regular worshipers who say in interviews that religion is central to their lives.

They represent an often-overlooked slice of gay America: the monogamous homebodies more likely to have met their mates at Bible study than at a bar.

"Our relationship is faith-based," said Mr. Bernhard, an actor and producer who immigrated to the United States from Indonesia as a teenager. "We truly believe, and that's what keeps us fairly strong. We do our prayers and our Bible
readings together, and depend a lot on our faith to carry us through difficult times."

Steven Baines, an elder with the Disciples of Christ who has performed gay blessings, said, "Most people think gay people are these God-hating people, but there are lots of us that feel very connected to our faith traditions."

"And just like we don't want to throw away our sexuality, we don't want to throw away our faith either because it has had just as much a role in shaping our lives as our sexuality has," said Mr. Baines, who works as a senior organizer for religious affairs for People for the American Way, a liberal advocacy group in Washington.

Mr. Manley, 39, and Mr. Bernhard, 45, say they believe that God brought them together. They met weeks after Mr. Manley's evangelical study and support group began praying for him to find a partner.

On their third anniversary they filed their domestic-partnership papers with the State of California, which legally recognizes gay partnerships. They had attended a Catholic church, but became disillusioned because of its stance on homosexuality and joined an Episcopal church.

Last year, they asked each other's parents for permission to marry. Now they are selecting hymns and having premarital counseling sessions with their priest, the Rev. Canon James Newman of St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Los Angeles, where they will celebrate their union.

Father Newman says this will be the first same-sex blessing in his parish. He keeps the guidelines for such blessings in a file marked "marriage." He requires that couples go through premarital counseling, starting by filling out a psychological inventory with 165 questions. He also requires that the couples be registered as domestic partners with the state.

"People are coming to the church for its blessing," Father Newman said, "and we have a right to look at issues of fidelity, faithfulness and permanence in a way we have never done before."

Christian churches that permit gay blessing ceremonies, though sometimes with limitations, are the Unitarian Universalists, Disciples of Christ, United Church of Christ and the Metropolitan Community Churches. Among the Jewish branches, Reform and Reconstructionist rabbis have permission.

The Episcopal Church, torn over the election of an openly gay bishop in New Hampshire last year, has never formally approved same-sex unions but left the door open for dioceses that wish to allow them. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) allows holy union ceremonies as long as they are not regarded as marriages.

Most of the denominations that permit gay unions keep no centralized records
because most are congregational in structure, which means that each congregation is relatively autonomous. Also, because gay unions have no legal status in any state but Vermont, there are no legal papers for the clergy to file.

The only denomination that keeps records is the Metropolitan Community Churches, which was founded as a predominantly gay church and performs about 6,000 marriages for same-sex couples each year, a spokesman said.

Gay couples who would never consider attending a march or protest for gay rights are now asking for church weddings. Ms. Trzcinski and Ms. Auger, who met in the National Guard, said they had lived together discreetly since 1977, attended a Catholic church and never considered themselves part of a gay movement. Ms. Auger said she did not even know there was a movement until she asked one day what the rainbow flag stood for.

The two used to attend weddings and hold hands secretly in the pews. It was only after Vermont passed its law permitting gay unions that they began to think about their own.

"We didn't want it to be like going to a justice of the peace or anything," Ms. Trzcinski said. "We would be more concerned about breaking vows we'd promised to God than to some guy in a suit."

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