

Saturday, Nov. 06, 2010

On a mission for equality

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Jack McKinney says he's always had a heart for the "outcasts of society." In February, McKinney, 45, former pastor at Pullen Memorial Baptist Church, opened McKinney Counseling and Consulting, where one of the specialties is gender identity disorders.

"I have been fortunate to know and counsel hundreds of individuals who would be considered 'outcasts' for one reason or another," McKinney said. "What I have learned from these people is an inspiration. Justice for all is not just a theory."

McKinney knew early in life that promoting the rights of the gay and lesbian community was to be part of his calling. When one of McKinney's closest high school friends publicly came out, McKinney had a decision to make.

"I could continue to believe the party line about how awful gay people were, or I could believe my own experience revealed by my close friend," McKinney said. "I chose to believe my experience.

The result has been the amazing privilege of befriending and counseling hundreds of LGBT people who are as wonderful as my childhood friend." McKinney began his journey at Pullen in 1998 when a friend submitted his name to Pullen's search committee.

After landing his dream job, McKinney set out to promote the rights of the LGBT community inside and outside the church.

After 18 months at Pullen, McKinney made his first big decision as pastor and asked the congregation to promote Nancy Petty, who is a lesbian, from associate pastor to co-pastor.

"The decision to share power with me was really a testament to his character," Petty said. "It demonstrated his commitment to what's fair, what's right and what is equal."

Said McKinney, "The fact that Nancy is a lesbian and leading a major congregation in a Southern city says a lot about Pullen's inclusive nature." McKinney continued to further his cause by joining with other religious leaders and activists in the Triangle to form the North Carolina Religious Coalition for Marriage Equality in 2004.

The organization, dedicated to achieving marriage equality for same-sex couples, met with religious leaders and asked them to sign statements promoting the cause and also held a rally at the General Assembly to publicize the movement. Recently, the NCRC4ME gave its remaining funds to Equality North Carolina, the leading advocacy organization in the state for LGBT rights and an organization in which McKinney also is active.

McKinney has run into criticism from the church and community, in the form of derogatory letters and angry phone calls, but more often than not he and his colleagues receive gratitude for their work, McKinney said.

"I also befriended a couple of people who initially sent me critical letters; when I responded they seemed surprised I was willing to talk to them and we started a much more civil exchange after that," he said.

After making extensive progress for the LGBT community and becoming a beloved fixture at Pullen, McKinney made the decision to start the next chapter of his life.

"I told the church I didn't want to become a mediocre minister, and I feared I was headed in that direction," McKinney said. "Yet, the one part of my job I still had great passion for was counseling."

McKinney had previously partnered with Kimball Sargent, a nurse psychotherapist and owner of Diverse Solutions, a local business that specializes in transgender therapy.

"I was looking for someone to help my clients in a spiritual way. Jack did just this," Sargent said. "He was so helpful and empathetic to my clients, and I was not surprised when he started his own business."

More than half McKinney's clients are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, and he also provides couples counseling for both heterosexual and gay couples, as well as pastoral consulting services for clergy and congregations.

McKinney said he does not find it hard to balance spirituality and professionalism in his counseling services.

"There is a misconception that pastoral counseling must involve some religious angle," McKinney said. "Actually, it is just talk therapy with a therapist who is also comfortable talking about faith or spiritual matters if the client wants to do so."

He remembers one of his most powerful memories from his professional life as presiding over a same-sex covenant ceremony at Pullen. "Both the fathers were well into their senior adult years and had some anxieties about being part of a gay wedding," McKinney said. After the ceremony, the fathers, who served at best men in the service, said they thought the service was beautiful.

"After that day," McKinney said, "I never assumed people could not change their minds about accepting gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender people."