

How Churches Defend Homosexual Rights in the U.S. in the 1960s

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Abstract: It is commonly considered that churches were usually opposers to the LGBTQ+ movements. Especially in the 1960s when churches played a negative role in the Gay Liberation Movement in the United States of America. But the fact seemed not to be that simple. As a matter of fact, in cities like San Francisco, some churches had started to play an active role in defending homosexual rights and they had a positive influence on homosexual acceptance among the American people. This paper discussed how specific churches defended homosexual rights in the United States of America in the 1960s by surveying what the Glide Memorial Church did in the 1960s. Through these resources, it can be easily found that the Glide Memorial Church, as a staunch supporter of the Gay Liberation Movement, helps defend homosexual rights in multiple ways including making sermons, holding public assemblies, etc. This research may be helpful to the LGBTQ+ movements today.

Keywords: Glide Memorial Church, America, the 1960s, homosexual rights, the Gay Liberation Movement

1. Introduction

Modern identity politics movements are considered to be an extension of the civil rights movement that started in the 1960s. The Gay Liberation Movement was one of the most significant components at that time. In common sense, the churches in the 1960s were always standing on the opposite side of the LGBT movement. In the 1960s, churches were often considered to be some kind of “home of conservatives”. But if so, how did the Gay Liberation Movement take place and grow fast in the United States in the 1960s, when churches still acted actively in ordinary peoples’ social lives? They will be a big hindrance, and it won’t be easy for activists to break through it. In this case, a transition of churches’ attitude toward homosexuality, can be assumed. In the 1960s, some Christian Churches were stalwart defenders of homosexual rights.

The Gay Liberation Movement started in the United States in the late 1960s. The whole movement was motivated by the civil rights movement and was a response to the widespread homophobic ideas. Homophobic ideas were held by catholic officers: “Lawmakers and public officials often invoked biblical authority for these policies. The destruction of Sodom and the perversity of the Roman Empire,, were frequently invoked as examples of civilizational ruin brought about by sexual permissiveness. [1]” And some denominations like the Mennonite Church have direct violence against homosexual persons [2]. At this period of time, some activists also began to call for homosexual rights by organizing marches and rallies and establishing organizations. For instance, the

Daughters of Bilitis (DOB), formed in San Francisco in 1955 and became active in fighting for lesbians' civil and political rights in the 1960s. The Council of Religion and the Homosexual, which was established in 1964 by the Glide Memorial Church, fights for homosexual rights as a representative of homosexual-friendly churches.

Topics around the Gay Liberation Movement have been studied by multiple historians in the past. In Marc Stein's *Rethinking the Gay and Lesbian Movement*, chapter 2 "Homophile Activism" he focuses on the relationship between the gay movement and politics at the time and describes how organizations such as the DOB fight to defend homosexual persons' political rights [3]. But how religious groups defended homosexual rights during that period is not mentioned in his studies. In Heather R. White's *Reforming Sodom: Protestants and the Rise of Gay Rights*, he writes about how churches are related to the Gay Liberation Movement in the chapter "Churchman and Homosexuality [1]". What should be noticed is: White realizes that churches do sometimes play a positive role in the Gay Liberation Movement and focuses on what individuals like the chairman of the Christian association, or committee member have said; However, since the Gay Liberation Movement is not only an intellectual movement but also a social or political movement, studies like this overlook an important aspect of the movement such as the Christian churches' positive social influence on the embracement of the gay community.

In response to this lack of literature, this paper takes Glide Memorial Hall in San Francisco for example, and focuses on how homosexual-friendly churches do to help homosexual people in the 1960s. Glide Memorial Church is one of the earliest homosexual-friendly churches in the United States. In the 1960s, Glide Memorial Church was active on the front line of the Gay Liberation Movement. Glide Memorial Church's sources will be discussed in this paper to show both how they thought and what they did.

2. Source Analysis

The first source we will explore is *What Is CRH* published by *Bay Area Reporter*, Volume 1, Number 4, 15 May 1971. Courtesy of the Internet Archive. In this article, the author introduced how the Council of Religion and Homosexual was established and set its principles and goal by summarizing its movements during the 1960s. In its principles and goals, it can be noticed that the CRH tried to defend homosexual rights in two main ways. 1. Building connections between homosexual people and religious groups. 2. Break through the public prejudice and stereotypes about homosexual people. Item 3 and item 9 can be good examples of the first way. Item 3 asked to build up channels between the religious community and homosexual people to strengthen consensuses [4]. Item 9 expresses a wish to build up more organizations like the CRH [4]. Item 1 and item 6 are a good reflection of the second way. Item 1 says that the CRH will help orient the public on different aspects of homosexual people [4] and item 6 says that the CRH will try to publish "more accurate and objective articles on homosexuality" by gaining help from the media [4]. At the end of this passage, the author asked for donations to the CRH and call on people to be a member of the CRH.

This article is an excellent summary of what had CRH done to defend the rights of homosexual people on behalf of the church and to make a positive influence on the Gay Liberation Movement. But it did not contain what exactly Glide Memorial Church has done in communities to reach its goals.

Sermons are a common way for churches to spread their ideas in the community. Rev. John V.

Moore¹ made sermons in the Glide Memorial Church. These sermons were recorded by Donovan Bess and were published in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, on January 11, 1965, on pages 1 & 14, titled *When Sex Become Impersonal*. His sermons were divided into three different parts: *Personal*, *Marriage*, and *Lives*. In the part *Personal*, he starts with the phenomenon of widespread sexual abuse in the United States at that time, suggesting that sex is becoming way less personal. He considers that a “misuse of sex” [5]. In the second part *Marriage*, he said he did not agree that marriages should be conventional. And in every relationship, there will be a dangerous trend: one may be a SUBJECT instead of a PERSON [5]. He challenged Simone de Beauvoir’s opinion that “Lesbianism is a rejection by women of their being used as sexual objects by men” since this tendency exists [5]. In the last part *Lives*, he claimed that the only way for us to get a “full life” is to combine our behavior with our interpersonal feelings, in which feelings we have the sense of LOVE [5]. In summary, Rev. John V. Moore’s opinion is that proper and healthy relationships have nothing to do with sex, but with personal emotions, whether love is involved or not. These statements undoubtedly spread the idea of equality between homosexual people and heterosexual people and defended homosexual rights. More directly, Rev. John V. Moore said “Denial of our sexuality, alienation of our sexuality, repression of our sexuality all stand in the way of the full life. [5]” This was a precise and powerful strike on anti-homosexual thinking.

In the same article, it can also be noticed that Rev. John V. Moore cited sentences from the Holy Bible to support his statements. “Jesus said that He came that we might live rich, full lives. [5]” “The teachings of Jesus are against any such misuse of sexuality. [5]” This kind of evidence might get more Christian people to embrace the idea of gay rights, which is good progress that can be made by churches.

Sermons weren’t the only way for churches to make a difference. Churches can make many positive impacts through social work. And that’s what Glide Memorial Church did in the 1960s. There are three main kinds of methods for the Church to manage its work.

The first way was to hold meetings. In those meetings, leaders of the Gay Liberation Movements and priests from Glide Memorial Church, exchange ideas and discuss how to call on more people to approve the idea of homosexual rights. Two meetings can be used as great examples. In 1964, Glide Organized a Retreat for Pastors and Homophile Leaders. Activists made conversations with each other and discussed how issues of the Tenderloin in the movement should be solved particularly. Debates like “How we view each other--and how we hope the relationships might be. [6]” were held. At the end of the meeting “in an effort to bring inequalities to an end.....published the enclosed “Brief of Injustices. [6]” In 1966, the Daughters of Bilitis Symposium on Theology was held. This meeting was meant to educate pastors, therapists, police officers, and others in positions that affected the rights and well-being of homosexual individuals [7].

The second way is to carry out community work like holding marches, and rallies publicly or offering direct help to homosexual people. Spreading the idea of homosexual rights, making it more convenient for homosexual people to live. This way is often the most visible to the public and is considered the most effective form of publicity. For instance, in 1968, CRH made an effort to get homosexual people into the phone book. This tended to make information publicly accessible for homosexual individuals and communities [8]. Besides, there was a famous rally held by the CRH known as the Ball at California Hall or The Raid at California Hall. Though it was illegal at that time to be gay and also illegal to come together and hold a rally as gay individuals, in order to publicize

¹ Priest from Glide Memorial Church

and raise funds for CRH, Jose Saria² helped the council plan a New Year's drag ball at California Hall. Not surprisingly, the ball ended up with the SFPD showing up and arresting three individuals. Later, the Raid at the California Hall was published in local newspapers [9]. And the subsequent publicity Press Conference and Lawsuit were also seen by residents. Figure 1 shows the picture of the four pastors standing on the same side as homosexual people. It was shown in the newspaper too. The rally caught everyone's attention, and people across the country learned more about the movement through the news, and some of them later devoted themselves to it. It also spread the idea of homosexual rights widely. This makes it a great example of the third way.



The ministers who sponsored the benefit (from left) Rev. Lewis Durham, Rev. Cecil Williams, Canon Robert Comer, Rev. Fred Bird, Rev. Charles Lewis, Rev. Clarence Culwell and Rev. Ted McMillan.

Figure 1: Pastors of CRH stands alongside with the homosexual people[10]

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Gay Liberation Movement became an important part of the Human Rights Movement in the 1970s and 1980s. Though most Christian churches still oppose the LGBTQ+ Movement till now, some churches once made significant efforts to defend homosexual rights like the Glide Memorial Church. The relationship between Christianity and the LGBTQ+ movement might be deeper than we expected since some Christian Churches were stalwart defenders of homosexual rights in the Gay Liberation Movement in the 1960s. This fact brings religious groups that are homosexual-friendly come to light. Renewing the understanding of the relationship between Christianity and the LGBTQ+ Movement in the history of the Human Rights Movement. These churches helped defend homosexual life by establishing organizations, spreading homosexual rights ideas, and offering help directly or indirectly in the community. These historical sources might make a difference. What Glide Memorial Church did in the past 60 years can be a great legacy of today, offering inspiration to the LGBTQ+ movement and even to the whole human rights movement in the future.

References

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² Member of CRH

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