

# Out at the Pulpit

An openly lesbian Pentecostal pastor on reconciling sexuality and faith. **By Katrina Fox**

Thirteen years ago, Sandra Turnbull became one of the first openly lesbian Pentecostal ministers when she was ordained into full time ministry and began pastoring the Metropolitan Community Church in Long Beach, Calif. A former Assemblies of God member, Turnbull began the inclusive Glory Tabernacle Christian Center in Long Beach in 2004.

The words “lesbian” and “Pentecostal” don’t exactly have a history of sitting comfortably together, especially in the Assemblies of God denomination, which denounces homosexuality as a sin. “It’s taught that this is an area of brokenness where people need healing,” says Turnbull.

Turnbull’s parents were Assemblies of God missionaries, and after high school she studied at the conservative headquarters of the organization in Missouri, all the time feeling “different” because she was attracted to girls.

“There were no negative messages about homosexuality, it was just never discussed,” she recalls. “It was just a sense of being ‘other’ and wondering why I always fell in love with my best girlfriends.”

At 22, Turnbull traveled to Amsterdam to work for a Christian charity called Youth with a Mission, and it was there that she met her wife and partner of 23 years, Janet Robertson, who was on staff with the organization at the time.

“Janet had known she was a lesbian since she was 5,” Turnbull laughs. “It never conflicted with her faith, but she knew enough not to talk about it or be in a relationship. Before I arrived she had

a dream in which she was running through the woods and from a tree came this figure. She ran into the person’s arms and she knew it was a woman but couldn’t see her face.

Then she felt the Holy Spirit saying, ‘You’ll marry a woman.’ When I arrived she felt God speak to her and say, ‘That’s the one.’”

Turnbull, now 48, is a warm, charming and engaging person, and her eyes light up as she talks about her partner. After the pair dated for a while, a worker at the organization found a love note written by Robertson to Turnbull and arrangements were made to send Turnbull home.

“They said they were sorry someone on their staff corrupted me,” she chuckles. “They kept me in a room until the flight, but Janet went to the leaders and said she wanted to tell

me she was sorry, so they allowed us to go for a walk. We went down to the canal and she proposed to me.”

When Turnbull returned home and came out to her parents, they were horrified and sent her to a Youth with a Mission base in North Hollywood for people “struggling

with homosexuality.” After a few months there, Turnbull learned she was living only a block away from Robertson. The pair reunited and had a commitment ceremony in 1986. But even now, Turnbull’s parents have difficulty accepting her sexuality. “They’re really loving and have come to a place where they try to be

accepting of me, but just can’t,” she laments. “My dad said, ‘Not until the Assemblies of God changes their stand on this.’”

So, why be part of a religion that sees

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Rev. Turnbull (left) and her partner, Janet Robertson

your love for another woman as sinful? How does being queer and Pentecostal work? Pentecostalism is simply a sense of the Holy Spirit filling people and speaking to them, Turnbull explains. “I believe Christianity is meant to be inclusive. A lot of [biblical teachings] on social issues are archaic.”

In fact, when Turnbull came out publicly, it wasn’t just her sexuality that conflicted with the traditional elements of the church, it was also her gender. “One of the things that bothers me in Christian churches is this tradition of male dominance over women and saying they get it from the Bible,” she asserts. “Christianity doesn’t have to be a patriarchal tradition where women are oppressed.”

Turnbull has put her money where her mouth is as pastor of the Glory Tabernacle. Their aim is to be inclusive of everyone, and about 70 percent of the congregation identifies as LGBT. Workers from the church, including Robertson, travel to places such as South Africa, where they offer help to rape survivors and homeless queer youth. ■