Same Church, Different Song of Equality

September 15, 2011 By Angel Mason

(As supporters of gay rights were kicked out of Southern Missionary Baptist Church last week, Terry Angel Mason was reminded of the church's better days fighting for equality.)

The scene that unfolded last week as proponents for gay rights were expelled from Southern Missionary Baptist Church in California seemed out of sync with its history. It's not how I remember the community.

The year: 1963. The place: the very same popular and well attended black church nestled on the west side of Los Angeles. The political climate: blacks engaged in a revolutionary struggle against Jim Crow laws, hoping to eventually eradicate them and acquire civil rights -- a struggle that would ultimately change the political climate of America forever. Standing in the wings is a young visionary by the name of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., destined to emerge as leader of this new cutting-edge movement and perhaps the most revered and inspiring black civil rights leader humanity has ever known.

At the piano is the incomparable Bertha Keys, daughter of the renowned Dr. Rev. Kelly Keys (pastor of the church) and over in the opposite corner, an extremely gifted organist (affectionately known as Jimmy). Center stage is a choir stand filled with young talented voices from all over the city. Suddenly the music begins to play and in typical worship fashion, feet begin to tap, hands begin to clap and the music fills the huge sanctuary as a young man only 9 years of age walks down the aisle singing from the depths of his soul, "Rock-a-my soul in the bosom of Abraham, oh rock-a-my-soul!"

Suddenly one of the church mothers rises to her feet, followed by hundreds of other parishioners and shouts to the 9-year-old boy, "Sang baaaaaaby sang!" Hats begin to fly, wigs get turned around, and purses get tossed in the aisle as ushers rush to parishioners' sides in an effort to calm down those who appear to be overwhelmed with emotion from the Holy Ghost, as they dance in the aisles vocalizing shouts of praise.

The little child singing is me, Terry Angel Mason, only one of hundreds of other same-gender-loving children who grew up in this church and spent what seemed like thousands of hours in worship services, choir rehearsals, prayer meetings and participating in countless other church events.

Now the year is 2011 and reflections of Jim Crow are as apparent as it was in the '60s, as evidenced by the emergence of radical right-wing groups like the Tea Party, STOP SB 48 and religious extremists known as The Family. Now, same-gender loving people have moved to the forefront of the modern day Civil Rights Movement as we struggle to achieve equality, not just for ourselves but for all disenfranchised and marginalized people who are victims of homophobia and discrimination.

The new Southern Missionary Baptist Church that was recently caught on video cameras as gay people were ejected from the premises has been transformed from a traditional red brick building to a new contemporary stucco building with beautiful stained glass and lush red pews that replaced the old wooden ones damaged by an earthquake. The pastor now is Xavier L. Thompson, who invited clergy on Wednesday from all over Los Angeles County to Southern Missionary Baptist Church in an effort to overturn SB 48. The law, which was recently signed by Gov. Jerry Brown, and which is dubbed the FAIR Education Act, ensures the correct teaching of the history of the LGBT community, along with that of the disabled and other minorities.

As a civil rights activist I am not surprised that black religious leaders would attempt to reverse this legislation because of the false and inaccurate distortions that have been purposely spread in the black community about the bill.

The opponents of SB 48 have once again skillfully and masterfully played upon the deeply entrenched homophobic prejudices of the black church. They have once more distracted black religious leaders by distorting the issues that SB 48 addresses.

“We believe you cannot sexualize history,” Pastor Thompson explained to a news crew.

But the new law has nothing to do with sex. It merely enforces the fair writing of history, meaning all those who have meaningful and positively contributed to history should have their contributions accurately chronicled regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or disability. It is a bill that promotes inclusiveness and proscribes and prohibits the bigoted omissions that have denied Americans the complete truth about how all types of Americans have contributed to this great land of ours.

But because the black church has been so historically and irrationally homophobic, all the opponents of SB 48 had to do was wave the rainbow flag in their faces, invoke the word “homosexual” and then sit back and cunningly watch as Black religious leaders do their dirty work by mobilizing to repeal a bill that actually honors and protects the contributions of all minorities, regardless of race and sexuality. Talk about throwing the baby out with the bath water.

Moreover, in their fanatic zealousness to begin this misguided process of repeal, the leaders of Southern Missionary Baptist Church committed one of the most un Christ-like actions of all -- they expelled from the church all other interfaith religious leaders and proponents of SB 48 who peacefully attended in order to dialogue with them. They even implied physical threat if gay rights supporters refused to leave.

What kind of message does this send to our LGBT youth? What message does it send to the 9-year-old boy who verges on a fight for his own emotional, spiritual and physical survival as he sits in those same pews Sunday after Sunday, hearing himself marginalized and damned to hell?

What kind of message are those of us who are Christians sending to that little boy, and to the world, if we do not step up and speak truth to power and firmly declare that our God is a god of love, mercy -- and equality.

Terry Angel Mason is a gay HIV/AIDS activist and author. His book Love Won’t Let Me Be Silent speaks about homosexuality and homophobia in the black community. Look for his upcoming book, They Say That I Am Broken, this fall.

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