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RELIGION

Gay rights advocates, evangelicals to meet

Austin's Soulforce and Atticus Circle members will meet in San Antonio with Cornerstone pastor who blamed gays for Hurricane Katrina.

By [Joshunda Sanders](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Sunday marks the 40th anniversary of the Stonewall riots in New York, widely considered to be the catalyst for the modern gay rights movement in the United States.

The riots were spurred by a police raid at the Stonewall Inn, a known hangout for gays and lesbians in the Greenwich Village neighborhood. The violent protests that followed in the early morning hours of June 28, 1969, created a springboard for gay activist organizations to form around the country.

To commemorate the anniversary, local leaders with Austin-based advocacy groups Soulforce and Atticus Circle will go to an unlikely place: Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, an evangelical megachurch whose pastor blamed Hurricane Katrina on gays who were planning a parade for the day the deadly storm hit New Orleans.

Members of both Austin groups, which support equal rights for the LGBT — lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender — community, wrote to the senior pastor of the church, the Rev. John Hagee, in early June to ask for a meeting.

Hagee invited them to services Sunday and agreed to sit down with organizers afterward.

Hagee, the founder of the 19,000-member church, infamously said in 2006 that ahead of Katrina, "New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God."

"They were recipients of the judgement of God for that," Hagee told National Public Radio at the time.

In an e-mail statement this month about his decision to meet with Austin advocates, Hagee said, "We gather in the spirit of Christ that commands us to 'love our neighbors as ourselves.' "

The meeting is the first of a series of visits to congregations the advocacy groups are calling Sundays of Solidarity.

"Sundays of Solidarity is meant to encourage people of faith in the LGBT communities, their supporters and allies to visit churches and set up meetings with congregations and leaders of those churches," said Jeff Lutes, the executive director of Soulforce.

"The goal is to reach a place of new understanding and to help those churches understand the real consequences of their anti-gay rhetoric and how it affects LGBT people and couples," he said.

As the anniversary of the riots arrives, the Cornerstone meeting takes on particular significance, said Jodie Eldridge, executive director of Atticus Circle.

"For the past 40 years, the LGBT community has been fighting for equality. And one of the major roadblocks to that equality are conservative churches that pick and choose homophobic aspects of the Bible to preach," Eldridge said.

About 50 members of Soulforce and Atticus Circle will sit among Cornerstone Church members and wear multicolored buttons that say, "Gay? Fine by Me" or "Gay Marriage? Fine By Me" as a way to start a conversation, organizers said.

"We know we won't be the only LGBT people at Cornerstone church on Sunday," Lutes said. "There will be people there who will be struggling quietly with the fact that their children or someone in their family just came out to them. We're doing this for them, too."

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