

'Evil doers': Church weeds out gays and bans them



Not welcome inside ... Andrew Pethebridge, excommunicated after admitting to being homosexual, outside St Andrew's Cathedral. *Picture by ROBERT PEARCE*

By GRAHAM WILLIAMS

When Andrew Pethebridge, a 22-year-old medical student, confided to his Anglican rector that he was homosexual he did not expect to be excommunicated.

St Alban's, Frenchs Forest, had for 10 years been his spiritual and social home. He had been confirmed there, taught Sunday school and was now a youth leader there.

A few weeks later, in November 1985, the Rev Len Straw, who has since died, handed him a brief letter.

It said in part: "I have been advised that in the present circumstances I am justified in not administering the sacrament of Holy Communion to you."

Andrew Pethebridge, now 29 and a doctor, was one of the first of an unknown number of homosexuals, both men and women, who have been weeded out and quietly excommunicated by clergy in Sydney diocese under a synod policy adopted in 1985.

This edict accepts homosexuals only if they remain celibate. It describes people like Mr Pethebridge as "open and notorious evil livers" who are to be denied

playing the organ or cutting flowers. (Full report, Page 9.)

Mr Straw had told him the parish council had agreed to this course of action.

"It was a bombshell and so very brutal," said Dr Pethebridge, who now works at the Albion Street clinic. "They cut me out of the parish totally. If there had been some compassion in what they did, I might understand. But even now it still hurts.

"I had done nothing to smudge the good name of the parish. I thought I had earned a degree of respect. I wasn't promoting homosexuality in any way.

"I had just got over years of wrestling with myself and seeing myself as a dirty, filthy sinner and there was nothing I could do to expiate it.

"I now realise that homosexuality is the worst abomination to Anglicans of this diocese. This is very similar to their attitude to women priests — very legalistic, medieval and literalistic."

In another case, a young woman told the *Herald* she was excommunicated in 1985 from an inner-city Anglican parish after the rector

tant sinner" who was "guilty" of being a practising lesbian.

"My partner with whom I have lived for 12 years was forced out of the same church as was at least one other woman who was a lesbian," she said.

The woman, who wants only to be known as Marion, said: "The rector would come up to me after each communion service and tell me not to come to communion the next Sunday.

"My sexual orientation is an attribute I was born with, just as people are born left-handed, and I regard it as part of the diversity of God's creation."

The rector had told her she must be celibate, "but celibacy is a gift of God which I don't believe is given to you just because you are a Christian gay or lesbian".

She then got a letter from the rector saying the parish council had unanimously carried a motion supporting his view that "unrepentant sinners including homosexuals should repent and not attend the Lord's Supper whilst unrepentant".

Both Dr Pethebridge and Marion are still practising Christians, but both now go to the Uniting Church where they say they find support and comfort.