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Christian, Jewish, Buddhist groups at head of NYC gay parade

BYLINE: By KAREN MATTHEWS, Associated Press Writer

As in past years, there was exhibitionism on display as the city's gay parade inched down Fifth Avenue and into Greenwich Village: Revelers gyrated in bikini briefs and pranced in spike heels.

But the placement of Christian, Jewish and Buddhist religious organizations near the front of Sunday's march ahead of AIDS service groups and political advocacy groups gave them unaccustomed prominence and lent gravity to the often outrageous event that celebrates the night gay bar patrons resisted a police raid.

"We stand for a progressive religious voice," said Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum of New York City's Congregation Beth Simchat Torah. "Those who use religion to advocate an anti-gay agenda I believe are blaspheming God's name."

Kleinbaum, who heads the world's largest predominantly gay synagogue, and the Rev. Troy Perry, founder of the Metropolitan Community Church, were the parade's grand marshals, waving from his-and-hers convertibles.

The march took place days after the New York State Assembly passed a bill legalizing same-sex marriage, which Gov. Eliot Spitzer supports. Although the bill is unlikely to pass the Republican-controlled state Senate any time soon, parade-goers said they were cheered by the Assembly's action.

"This is one very important step toward full equality for all New Yorkers," Kleinbaum said.

City Council Speaker Christine Quinn, one of the nation's most prominent openly gay elected officials, said she could not predict when the Senate might approve same-sex marriage.

"All conventional wisdom in New York state on gay marriage is out the window," she said. "I think we are really doing better than anyone would ever have thought we could be doing on this."

But it was the religious organizations among the wildly dressed parade-goers that made this year's event a bit different.

A Buddhist group carried signs that said "Construct Dignity in Your Heart" and "Don't Block Your Buddha."

"We're all Buddhas," said Hortense De Castro, a teacher from Manhattan. "It's just a matter of letting it come out."

The gay Roman Catholic group Dignity had a float and a giant rainbow flag. Jeff Stone, secretary of the New York chapter, said he was hopeful that the church would someday change its stance opposing homosexuality.

"We see that the opinion of ordinary Catholics is changing," he said. "Eventually what happens at the grass roots percolates up in the church."

Mayor Michael Bloomberg marched with Quinn and other elected officials including Lt. Gov. David Paterson.

There were contingents of gay police officers and firefighters as well as ethnic gay groups including South Asians, Haitians and American Indians.

An Argentinian and Uruguayan group featured an Eva Peron impersonator in a flowing gown.

Tens of thousands of people attended the march. Spectators lining Fifth Avenue included gay people sporting rainbow flags and curious tourists.

Toni Cinanni of Perth, Australia said she was surprised at the prominence of the church groups.

"I thought the religious groups had hijacked the parade," she said. "I couldn't put it together, religion and sexuality."

Andrew Stanley of Shrewsbury, England said the march was "very colorful."

"I've never seen one before," he said, "but I think it's a good idea."

The annual gay pride parade, one of dozens that takes place around the world, commemorates the 1969 Stonewall riots when patrons at a Greenwich Village gay bar fought back against a police raid.