Four believers tell their stories to USA TODAY's Cathy Lynn Grossman.

Keep the faith but enlarge it, student says

Brian Flanagan, 28, is a very patient Catholic, a student of theology who sees church change as a shift across centuries.

In his lifetime, he doesn't expect it to cease calling homosexual behavior a sin. Yet Flanagan, who is openly gay, waits and hopes.

"I know many gay Catholics who have been hurt by the institutional authorities within the church. ... They couldn't go to church without being angry. But that has never been my experience."

He says he finds much that's "amazingly positive and fruitful" in a Catholic view of relationships: "To be kind, to be respectful, not to treat sex as throwaway or frivolous or treat people as instruments. To think of fidelity and commitment."

The familiar adage "love the sinner, hate the sin is dismissed by gay people as a meaningless rhetorical trick," he says. "But, in fact, it's simply a way people honestly try to figure out what's best." He says he sees good reason for people to take centuries to change an entrenched teaching.

He is now finishing 23 years of unbroken Catholic education. After his graduate studies at Boston College, he'll look for work as a theologian, specializing in theories of church organization.

"There's a healthy tension between those who bear witness to the past and to the world -- priests, bishops and the magisterial authority -- and people in a local place exploring how to be Christian in the face of new challenges, new experiences" and moral questions -- sexuality, the death penalty, just war, a just economic structure -- "that affect our lives together."

For Flanagan, the Catholic Church is "a family that you love even when you disagree. You stay and you have the argument."

She found home in a new church

The Rev. Jo Gayle Hudson will always grieve for the faith she grew up in.

But the United Methodist Church, the religion that taught her about social justice, the one in which she felt called by God to be a pastor, won't let lesbians such as Hudson serve in the pulpit.
She was in the closet when she was ordained a deacon and associate pastor. Just weeks before her ordination as an elder, she was "outed."

"Like many closeted gays, you truly believe if you are good enough, love well enough and work hard enough, everyone will overlook that one little thing about you that is just your normal life."

Instead, she had to find a new faith home.

Hudson switched to the United Church of Christ. It's similar to Methodism theologically, she says, but structured differently. Churches are autonomous, and one "had the courage to call an out lesbian."

Seven years later, in 2004, she was invited to preach at the pioneering gay church in Dallas, the Cathedral of Hope.

Immediately, "I felt the spirit. I felt at home."

"This is a church with a passion for radical inclusion, a passion for justice, an extravagant welcome," says Hudson, 52, now the Cathedral's rector and senior pastor.

"Every week I hear people say, with joy and relief in their voice, 'You've saved my life.'"

Says Hudson, joy and relief in her own voice: "God creates out of chaos. God does new things." --- Ex-priest rethinks Bible’s authority

Barbara Brown Taylor, 55, aspires to be a "holy troublemaker."

But to do it, she had to relinquish her ordination as an Episcopal priest, says Taylor, who describes her decision in Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith.

Now, on Sundays she writes, prepares the religion courses she teaches at Piedmont College, or works with her husband on their northwest Georgia farm.

She drifts by churches some Sundays and speaks on the national Episcopal circuit. But it's hard to find a church home when she sees some lose sight of "the whole purpose of the Bible ... to convince people to set the written word down in order to become living words in the world for God's sake."

Instead, she says, she sees too many people sink into vitriol, wielding words of faith as weapons.

"Jesus knew the Hebrew Scriptures, and he departed from them. He was not faithful to the Scripture of that time, and today the Bible teaches me the book is not the final authority. ... The spirit is moving; Scripture is not the only measure."

As a priest, she never blessed same-sex unions, since her bishop opposed this. But Taylor believes the clergy should talk about "the virtues of righteous sexual relationships of any kind and bless them."

God is found wherever people are "non-abusive, mutually self-giving, honest and monogamous."

Taylor remains a vocal Episcopalian, staying in the fold because, "If you leave, no one has to deal with you anymore."

--- He doesn't attend a beloved church
As deeply as it pains him, architect Jim Cullion, 52, is pulling away from his Episcopal parish home at Boston's landmark Trinity Church.

As a gay man, he says, his church let him down during Massachusetts' gay marriage battles.

"This is one of the most important churches in the country, facing one of the most important issues in our time, and it didn't step out in leadership," he says.

He has prayed there since the 1980s, founded the church's lesbian and gay fellowship, helped raise money to restore the magnificent Henry Hudson Richardson architecture and still serves on the conservation committee. But now, instead of walking six blocks to Trinity most Sundays, he walks in the arboretum.

"Trinity is full of amazing, incredibly bright, interesting and involved people. The music is wonderful. The liturgy is fresh and exciting." Yet a church should be a place "where you reconnect with God, where you grow."

"But my church has to do what Christ did, take risks to lead the way in this world. Trinity did not."

Even as the Episcopal Church USA is torn internally and under fire internationally over gay clergy and blessing same-sex unions, Cullion's focus is local. If the U.S. church were to split or be forced out of the Anglican Communion, "I couldn't care less," he says.

But "there is nothing to support the exclusion of gay people. People who think they are speaking for Christ and excluding people have missed the mark."

--- Gays, religion in the headlines Among recent controversies:

*July 2005. The United Church of Christ becomes the first mainline Christian denomination to endorse civil unions for gays.

*August 2005. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America votes to maintain its ban on openly gay clergy.

*November 2005. The United Methodist Church's highest court defrocks openly gay minister Irene Elizabeth Stroud of Philadelphia and reinstates a Virginia pastor suspended for refusing to let a gay man join his church.

*November 2005. The Vatican issues an instruction to Roman Catholic seminaries and bishops not to train or ordain as priests men who have "deep-seated homosexual tendencies."

*March 2006. A Presbyterian Church (USA) judicial council rules the Rev. Jane Adams Spahr did not violate the denomination's constitution when she officiated at the unions of lesbian couples.

*March 2006. Conservative Jewish rabbis postpone a vote until December on whether to permit blessing same-sex unions and lift a ban on ordaining gay rabbis.

*May 2006. The Episcopal Diocese of California elects the Rev. Mark Handley Andrus of Birmingham, Ala., as bishop. The news that he is not gay quells fears of a potential firestorm such as the 2003 fight when the Episcopal Church accepted its first openly gay bishop.

Research by Susan O'Brian

--- Conflict for Presbyterians
The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) faces a similar conflict -- theologically and politically -- to the Episcopal Church USA at its assembly starting Thursday in Birmingham, Ala.

Can a local church ordain a gay elder when the denominational constitution forbids it?

At its 1996 assembly, the 2.4-million-member church set a national standard banning ordination for openly gay deacons, elders and ministers, but retaining those already ordained.

There has been disagreement ever since.

A task force report to be presented in Birmingham doesn’t address gay ordination directly, but its governance recommendations, if adopted, could open the door to it by acknowledging the discretionary power of local and regional churches.

"We're trying to clarify which national standards are essentials for everyone and where discretion can apply," says the Rev. Jack Rogers, who appointed the task force when he was moderator for the national church in 2001.

In his new book, Jesus, the Bible and Homosexuality, he calls for full rights of membership for homosexuals in the church.

The Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) formed in 1974 to hew to "the inerrancy and authority of Scripture" and traditional roles for women.

By Cathy Lynn Grossman