

Orthodox statement on gays welcomed

By JANICE ARNOLD, Staff Reporter

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MONTREAL — Longtime gay-rights advocate David Brody, a practising Orthodox Jew, hails the statement on acceptance of homosexuals signed by what is now more than 170 Orthodox rabbis and others as “an extremely progressive” development, but he regrets that it doesn’t approve “affirmation ceremonies” for same-sex couples.

“I never thought I would see such an open-minded document in my lifetime,” said Brody, who is in his late 60s and has been a member of Congregation Shaar Hashomayim for many years. He’s hopeful that in time further steps will be taken toward full equality for gays and lesbians.

Shaar Hashomayim’s Rabbi Adam Scheier and assistant Rabbi Yonah Berman are among the signatories of the Statement of Principles on the Place of Jews with a Homosexual Orientation in Our Community, released in July and signed by mainly modern Orthodox rabbis, as well as educators and mental health professionals, from the United States, Canada and Israel.

The other Montreal signatory is Rabbi Mordechai Glick, a psychologist and leader of a small Côte St. Luc congregation.

Brody said he has always felt welcome at Shaar Hashomayim, but the statement affirms that he’s respected as any other Jew in the community, except in its denial of recognition of his choice of partner.

“Why can’t our rabbis bless two people who pledge their love and fidelity and pursuit of the values of Judaism... Same-sex unions should not be compared to heterosexual marriage,” said Brody.

Rabbi Scheier said that is “not where we are right now.” To him, the significance of the statement is its attempt to reconcile Jewish law’s prohibition of homosexual acts with the recognition that “wonderful members of the community,” like Brody, should be welcomed as full members.

There will be no noticeable changes at the synagogue, the rabbi said, because its practice already is in keeping with the principles that were drawn up after six months of discussion. Although Rabbi Scheier is modern Orthodox, Shaar Hashomayim is

independent of any denomination, but follows traditional Judaism.

For Rabbi Scheier, 31, the statement is “a beautiful affirmation of what forward-looking congregations such as Shaar Hashomayim have practised for many years: the unwavering commitment to Jewish law coupled with a deep sensitivity to all members of our community, regardless of sexual orientation.

“We have no synagogue policies – ritual or otherwise – that discriminate against homosexuals, and the statement affirms our commitment to this openness.”

Rabbi Scheier is also president of the interdenominational Montreal Board of Rabbis, but did not endorse the statement in that capacity.

Brody’s other caveat about the statement was its inclusion of mental-health professionals, which he said leaves the impression homosexuality is a disorder or a personal choice. “I think it would have been more appropriate to include sociologists,” he said. (The statement affirms the right of homosexuals to reject therapies that some rabbis, it acknowledges, believe can “change” them, noting that most mental-health professionals today believe they are ineffective or even damaging.)

Both Rabbi Scheier and Brody agree strongly with the principle enunciated that Jewish gays and lesbians should not be pressured to marry a person of the opposite sex because it has been shown to have harmful consequences for all involved.

Brody has spoken at Shaar Hashomayim on growing up Orthodox and gay, and Rabbi Scheier wrote words of praise in the introduction to Brody’s novel, *Mourning and Celebration: Jewish, Orthodox and Gay/Past & Present*, which he published last year and imagines what it would have been like to be a young gay man in a 19th-century shtetl.

But he adds, “I go to synagogue not as a gay person. I go as a Jew. I have no agenda.”

Rabbi Glick, founder of Congregation Ahavat Yisroel, comes from more traditional Orthodoxy and an older generation than Rabbi Scheier. At one time, he thought that psychotherapy might be able to change sexual orientation, if that’s what a person wants.

Today, he’s not so sure. There is some evidence of its efficacy, he said, but sufficient scientific research has not been conducted, he said, for him to recommend it.

Rabbi Glick likened the gay-rights struggle to that of black people for full civil rights.

“I know some gays and their issues and problems. I’m also sensitive to the fact that people do not change their attitudes easily, particularly among religious people,” he said. “I regard this as still being an evolving issue.”

For him, this is an important development because it publicly states that “Jews are Jews, and should be welcomed and part of the synagogue. But it’s not anything ground-breaking, it just reminds people that we have to go out of our way to be more welcoming.”

While homosexuality is not condoned by Orthodox Judaism, the individual with that orientation must be accepted, he said. “The two things should not be mixed up.”

He said he would have no problem with same-sex couples coming to his congregation, either.

A notable absence from the list of signatories was Rabbi Alan Bright of Congregation Shaare Zedek, who has been outspoken in his support for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in his synagogue’s life. He even wrote to Pope Benedict a lengthy letter explaining why he believes homosexuals must be accepted as full participants in Jewish religious life, and urging the pontiff to reconsider the Roman Catholic Church’s position on homosexuality.

“I was not approached on this matter or asked to sign it. Of course, I would have,” Rabbi Bright explained. “Perhaps you should ask the rabbis who were party to it. I would like to know the reason.”