

Nationwide Presbyterian Vote in Progress

Northern New England Presbytery Defeats Anti-Gay Amendment

BY CHUCK FRANKLIN

A nationwide vote is in progress within the Presbyterian U.S.A. church on whether to adopt an amendment to their Book of Order prohibiting the blessing of same-sex couples.

During an early February meeting, the Northern New England Presbytery, which includes all of Vermont's Presbyterian churches, soundly defeated the amendment by a vote of 27 for and 68 against.

The Rev. Michael Brown, co-pastor with his wife The Rev. Becky Strader of Christ Church Presbyterian in Burlington, attended last month's meeting in Haverhill, Mass. Brown explained that people may have voted against the proposed change for a number of reasons other than being in favor of gay unions.

"This amendment signals prohibitive language that is a new trend," he said. "The Presbyterian Church has historically not been known for prohibiting things. The flavor of the General Assembly [their national governing body] to cast out prohibitions like this is very chilling."

"It's like opening Pandora's box," he continued, "and suggests other things we might not be allowed to do."

However, he said, the vote could also be indicative that the tide is turning pro-gay. Brown said that those who spoke at the meeting in favor of the amendment did not seem to have a coherent strategy, unlike some other presbyteries.

Dr. Richard Hunt, former professor of history and dean of students at Trinity College,

also attended the meeting as a voting member. Hunt said that Christ Church Presbyterian, where he is a member, has been a leader in resisting homophobia within the church at large for over 15 years.

"By being strongly engaged in our ministries, slowly the rights for the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered community [are being recognized] in the church," he said.

"Our reputation has made people look seriously [at this issue] and gradually made them more accepting," said Hunt.

Hunt echoed Brown's feeling that some may have voted against the amendment simply because they thought it was a bad piece of legislation, running against the autonomy of the local churches.

The moderator of the Northern New England Presbytery, Wendy Eickenberg, said she was "really pleased with the outcome of the vote." She characterized the arguments on both sides during the meeting as much more meaningful and devoid of rancor.

"The tone was different," she said. "The remarks were thoughtful and seemed to come from more deep-seated religious beliefs, and away from bigotry and hate, which has dominated in the past."

One issue that both Hunt and Eickenberg brought up was the dilemma that Vermont justices of the peace who are Presbyterians would face if the amendment passed.

For example, a Craftsbury Presbyterian who is justice of the peace and also an elder in his church would be prohibited by the amendment from

having anything to do with holy unions for same-sex couples. Yet, under Vermont law, he would be required to perform a same-sex civil union if asked to do so.

This sort of dilemma lends a sort of "Gothic subplot" to the entire process, according to Hunt.

The voting of the presbyteries nationwide, which will continue through March, stands at 25 for and 55 against as of mid-February. With about half the nation's presbyteries having cast their votes, this signals a chance that the amendment will eventually be defeated, even if by a small margin.

The Presbyterian Church voted in an amendment to their Book of Order in 1996/97 that included a fidelity/chastity requirement for ordained church officers. In 1997/98 they attempted to remove this provision; it failed.

The full text of this amendment, referred to as "Amendment O," is as follows:

"Scripture and our Confessions teach that God's intention for all people is to live either in fidelity within the covenant of marriage between a man and a woman or in chastity in singleness. Church property shall not be used for, and church officers shall not take part in conducting, any ceremony or event that pronounces blessing or gives approval of the church or invokes the blessing of God upon any relationship that is inconsistent with God's intention as expressed in the preceding sentence."

To check the latest status of the nationwide vote, log on to the Internet at www.presbyweb.com.

Community Center Secures Permanent Space



As a response to the lack of a permanent, substance free, safe space for GLBT people to learn about their history, hold meetings, and participate in cultural events, the R.U.1.2? Community Center has established its first ever office space.

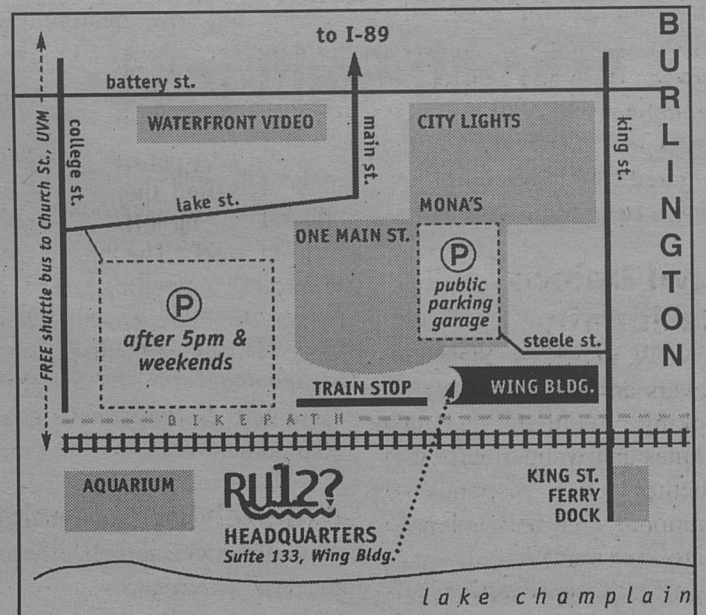
After only a few weeks of occupancy, the space reservation calendar is packed with events, meetings, and classes.

Organizers have dubbed the space R.U.1.2? Headquarters, or R.U.1.2? HQ for short. Currently, HQ hosts several committee meetings and volunteer functions.

The Burlington R.U.1.2? Community Center is a charitable organization with the purpose of providing venues for the social, cultural, artistic and educational endeavors of the GLBT and Allied communities through visibility, awareness and community building.

Their new office is located in Suite 113 of the Wing Building on Steele Street in Burlington.

To assist with the moving in process, contact their new office at 860-RU12 (7812), or e-mail thecenter@ru12.org.



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