

# To Bless and Affirm ... or Not: Guilford UCC Church Ponders How to Relate to Gays & Lesbians

By JIM PETRIE

Although the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ voted to declare itself Open and Affirming by 270 votes to 93, the Guilford Community Church, affiliated with the UCC, wants to take a year to discuss the matter.

"There is quite a bit of controversy over it through the churches throughout Vermont," says Patricia Houghton, a coordinator of the congregation's discussions and a former long-time deacon of the Guilford Church. "They want churches to get together and discuss this and try to see how people feel. Some churches are discussing it, some don't want to discuss it at all."

By declaring itself Open and Affirming, a church is stating that it will "admit homosexuals to all aspects of the church — becoming pastors, teaching Sunday school, everything," according to Tom Ragle, another of the discussion coordinators. "Affirm," says Ragle, "means to affirm the right of an individual to his or her own sexual orientation."

Rather than accept the preference of the state conference, "This church has voted to do a study on it ourselves," says Houghton. "Each church that Tom has spoken with has said to really go slow on this and get both sides of the issue; don't get into something very quick because it's so controversial, and many feel it might split the church."

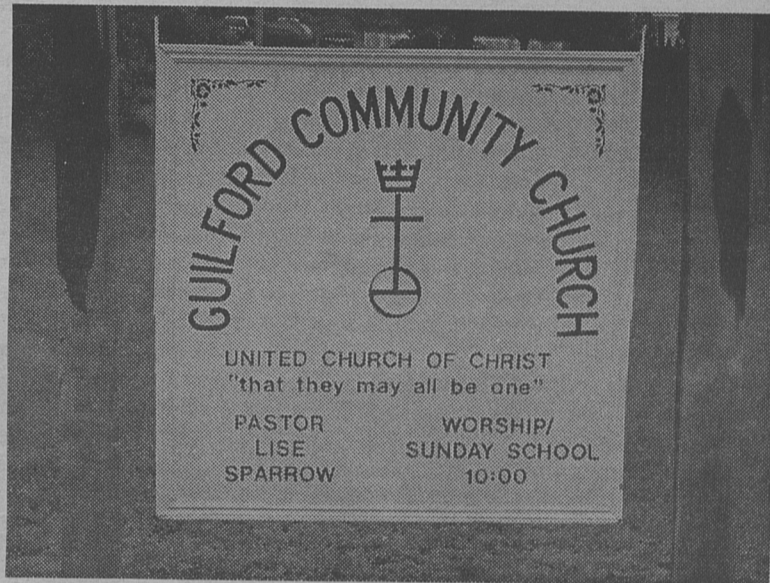
These discussions have been a long time coming. According to Ragle, the national church of the

UCC first began to look into Open and Affirming in 1969, in relation to the civil rights and anti-discrimination movements of that time. In 1972 a gay man was ordained as a pastor in California, and thereafter at nearly every biennial meeting of the national synod of the UCC, a resolution was presented for the declaration of Open and Affirming. It wasn't until 1985 that the synod passed the resolution and declared itself Open and Affirming.

Part of the premise of the traditional New England Congregational Church is that outside organizations may not impose rules or requirements on any individual church. Instead, the members of each church's congregation decide its policies. Therefore, once the national synod passed the Open and Affirming policy, it could only recommend that state conferences and individual churches do likewise.

The Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ has been discussing the question of Open and Affirming over the past year. "The more conservative members of the UCC, in answer to Open and Affirming, set up their own task force," says Ragle. "The pastors and others formed something called 'Welcoming and Transforming.' What it means is that anybody is welcome to worship in our church, but we hope the Holy Spirit will transform them from homosexual to heterosexual."

Although the Welcoming and Transforming panel was never recognized by the conference, it was acknowledged as an independent body of members who had something



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Discussion Coordinator Tom Ragle

to say. When the final vote on Open and Affirming came up at the Vermont Conference of the UCC this June, an amendment to replace it with Welcoming and Transforming was proposed and defeated.

But it wasn't just the fact that the national synod and the Vermont Conference were dealing with the issue that led the leaders at Guilford Community Church to address Open and Affirming. "I personally would like to be able to bless Civil Unions in the Church," says Pastor Lise Sparrow. "Two couples

have come to ask me if that was a possibility. It happens that neither couple was somebody that the church knew. One couple approached me on the internet from California, when [the legislature] first passed the Civil Union law."

Since Sparrow was an interim pastor at the time, the church council told her that she could not bless the union in the church, but they would not object to her using her discretion outside the church. Pastor Sparrow thought it best to recognize the council's position, and

declined the request.

The second request came shortly after Sparrow was made 'settled' pastor of the church. "Again, it was someone who did not come from our church. I ran it by the lay-leaders, and a red flag went up," says Sparrow. She then took the question to the church council, and there were definitely people in the church who strongly opposed the idea. Then a decision was made to open the question up to the congregation. In the meantime, however, the pastor would follow the precedent that there would be no Civil Unions in the church until a policy was established by the whole congregation.

"That was the thing that allowed people to stand the idea of going through this [discussion and decision] process," she explains. "So, we're going along with precedent, which has been that it's never happened before, and until something changes, it won't happen."

Recognizing that people in the Guilford church are split, the church council decided that the study should not be done in haste. "We're taking our time with this," says Ragle, "to let people adjust, to see the lay of the land and make up their mind."

The coordinators have begun the process with plenary sessions, large meetings to discuss different aspects of the greater issue, being careful to present both sides. The first plenary session was held in May, on the topic "What does the Bible have to say about homosexuality?" The panel consisted of a pastor

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## Civil Union Study Progressing Solomon & Rothblum's Study Compares CU Partners to Marrieds

By EUAN BEAR

In a groundbreaking study, University of Vermont Professor Esther Rothblum and Assistant Professor Sondra Solomon are comparing the first-year participants in civil unions to their married siblings and to gay or lesbian couples who have not been joined in civil union. In the period from July 1, 2000 — when the law first took effect — to June 30, 2001, there were 2300 civil unions. The researchers — funded by a \$13,500 grant from the Gill Foundation and \$5000 from UVM — contacted every couple for whom there was a current address to invite their participation in the study.

"Previous research I've done on lesbians involved what is called a 'convenience sample,'" explained Rothblum. "That is, it's really easy to get a certain segment of the lesbian population to respond to surveys and questionnaires by putting advertisements in lesbian publi-

cations, having a booth at Pride events, and so on. But that means you only get a certain segment of the population, and that raises questions about how representative your study results actually are. In this study, it's remarkable to have all 2300 certificates, a whole population, in my hand."

The project involves sending out and tallying six questionnaires for each participating couple: two for the civil union couple (11 pages), two for a married sibling and his or her spouse; and two for a gay or lesbian friend or acquaintance couple who have not had a civil union. The questionnaires are tallied anonymously — each set of questionnaires is given a number so that related sets can be tracked and compared.

Some of the 2300 civil union couples are not candidates for the study for any of several reasons. In some cases, Rothblum said, neither partner in the civil union has a married sibling. In other cases, the

couple's social circles do not include other gay or lesbian non-civil union couples.

"The response rate has been very high," especially from out-of-staters, said Rothblum. She said that some Vermont respondents have reported that they have gotten requests to participate in several civil union studies, while out-of-staters have not been subject to that level of scrutiny.

"These couples are very different as a group from the more usual study participants we get from an activist community," Rothblum revealed. "They're not activist, don't participate in community events like Pride marches or festivals, and they're close to their families of origin. We have lots of people of color. I suspect that these couples are, in fact, doing what their families expect them to do — getting 'married.'"

"I'm a woman of color — Afro-Caribbean — and I'm going to love looking at the interracial cou-

ples" in the study, said co-researcher Dr. Sondra Solomon. "It has been a difficult aspect of our history to be inclusive and welcoming of gay men and lesbians of color within our communities. There needs to be more research on acceptance."

Another preliminary impression was that the out-of-state couples contacted said they have positive feelings toward Vermont because of their civil union experiences.

"These couples are pioneers," said Rothblum, the perhaps atypical members of a pent-up demand, couples who have been together for a long, long time. "I would really like to compare this group to another in about five years. And by that time, we can also look at civil union dissolutions. It's hard to break up from out of state because there's a residency requirement." At least one partner must reside in the state for six months prior to the formal dissolution of the civil union. "People are telling us they have broken up but they have not legally dissolved their civil union."

Solomon suggested that the data derived from the study would provide a roadmap that would encourage other states to follow suit

in extending marriage benefits and responsibilities to gay and lesbian couples. The study is longitudinal, meaning that the couples involved will be contacted for updates over a period of years.

The study is modeled on a famous 1980s study on American couples. "Somehow those researchers got 12 thousand married or cohabiting couples to complete a 57-page questionnaire about household chores, leisure activities, how they dealt with conflict, their incomes — in het couples, it tends to break down by gender, and in our study, we expect it to be more equal," explained Rothblum.

Gay and lesbian couples, said Rothblum, tend to get more support from friends, while straight couples get equal amounts of support from friends and family. The researchers have so far gotten equal numbers of responses from male and female married siblings of civil union couples. And, while the researchers wondered whether married siblings would answer such questions as "How many times do you have sex?" and "Are you monogamous?" several of the married siblings have written, "I'd do anything for my gay brother/lesbian sister." ▼