

Guilford UCC Ponders

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from Hartford, Connecticut who was speaking for Open and Affirming, and a pastor from Wilmington, Vermont who spoke about why he felt it should not be passed.

Another plenary session was held on June 20, titled "Is sexual orientation fixed or changeable?" The speakers were a doctor from Dartmouth and a speaker from Exodus, an organization that promoting "freedom from homosexuality through the power of Jesus Christ," according to the organization's website.

In future plenary sessions, Ragle hopes to include speakers from the homosexual and bisexual communities, those who have been "transformed" to heterosexuality, and perhaps parents of gay and "transformed" individuals. "In the fall, we will have a panel of people representing the Welcoming and Transforming group and a panel representing Open and Affirming," says Ragle. "Tom

has meetings planned to the end of this year and into the first of next year," adds Houghton.

Between the plenary sessions, church members are holding small, neighborhood meetings to discuss the topic further. "These small group sessions are not intended to try to convert anybody," explains Ragle. "They are not debates, they are not arguments – nobody wins. The point is to listen, to hear what other people say and know where they're coming from."

Elaine Petrie, a long-time member of Guilford Community Church (and this reporter's mother), has been attending the meetings and has been impressed with the atmosphere of understanding. At the neighborhood meeting she attended last week, she shared with the group that two of her five children are homosexual. "It was the first time I had ever told anyone," she explained. "No one had ever even asked me."

Everyone seems to agree that the issue is generally split demographically, with older members of the congregation tending to be more against the Open and Affirming declaration than the younger churchgoers. According to Pastor Sparrow, approximately 35% of the congregation is over 60, with the majority of the balance being between 30 and 60. Says one member of the church, "We have a lot of young and middle-age people in our church. I feel that it would pass easily if we voted on it tomorrow, but we do not wish to drive out of the church long-term senior members, who are much loved and respected."

Another churchgoer carries it a bit further. "People who have had

a higher education tend to think more about biblical issues and theology, and have thought more critically about the bible. People without [education] tend to interpret the bible more literally."

"I have been very impressed by the discussions," states Pastor Sparrow. "They have not been embattled, people are really trying to listen hard, because we really are split in the church, and people realize that. If nothing else," she continues, "we want to feel like we've been as thoughtful to each other as possible as this goes on. We're really digging in and trying to figure this out."

According to the pastor, there are at least two lesbian couples who attend church regularly, but no

gay men have identified themselves to her. "I think that [the lesbians] were surprised," comments Sparrow, "because the way you feel at Guilford Church is that you would just assume it would be fine. When this came up, it had never occurred to them that it wouldn't be okay."

"I've always thought we were an Open and Welcoming church," says Houghton, "but they want to be affirming of everything, and some don't like that because of their convictions and beliefs. That's the real issue, I think, in our church."

"I'm not sure what form the final motion will be," says Ragle. "The motion could be simply that we accept blessing Civil Unions in the church. It could be a broader issue that we declare ourselves an Open and Affirming Church. But it will minimally address the issue of Civil Unions within the church." ▼

Jim Petrie is a native Vermonter who grew up in Guilford and now lives in Leicester.

According to the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ, of its 160 member churches, nine have declared themselves to be Open and Affirming. They can be found in: Bennington (Second Congregational), Burlington (College Street), Danville, Greater Hartford, Middlebury, Putney, Saxton's River, Thetford, and Westminster West.

Pippin, Not Pan

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hardly talk to anyone because I was afraid of having crushes. Then I found Mike Lew's book [*Victims No Longer*, the first book for men about healing from sexual abuse].

My wife and I were fabulously compatible, but we weren't communicating about major issues, like sex.

So I had this romanticized image of the Faeries. Great, I thought, here are these egalitarian gay hippies, what's not to like? They're willing to talk about things that don't get talked about elsewhere, sit in a circle, use tools that the rest of society doesn't – or doesn't use in the same way – like ritual.

Ritual [as the Faeries use it] is about change, not about staying the same, about being open to possibilities, dynamic movement, pushing through blockage. We mess up a lot, but we acknowledge that's it's okay to mess up and move on.

Which isn't to say there are no rules like there are in other gay male cultures. We have this thing called the Faery Purity Committee. The motto is: there are no rules here, don't break them.

At almost the same time, I became a volunteer board member at Outright – that was the fall of 1999. By the summer of 2000 I became a staff member when Tage Lilja left. I began therapy then because I was in crisis about coming out as gay and the total upheaval that would mean in my life and the loss of support from my wife. It was an inspiration to be working with these youth.

Losing my life partner was the number one tragedy about coming out as a gay man. But it was harder to come out to my mother as an abuse survivor. My story just doesn't make sense unless you know I'm a survivor. Mom was fine with my gay identity. But Mom had a

tough time with her guilt over not protecting me from the guy who abused me. And I am very clear that there was *nothing* my mom could have done to protect me.

I think the kids at Outright have been abused at a higher rate than is true for the general population. It takes a long time for kids to trust you, especially about sexual issues. After about nine months there was a spate of disclosures about sexual abuse. Queer kids are vulnerable. They're already shut down and unable to talk about their feelings.

Working with Outright has been a natural continuation of my activist process: global to statewide to local to personal. Now I think my work is to work individually and with small groups, to speak truthfully about my own experience. Convincing McDonald's to buy free-range chicken is very important work, but it's not my work. My work is about gender and sexual identity and oppression, about those abuses of power.

Part of my work with kids is clearly about releasing myself. I work one-on-one, do some group work on finding a voice to speak truthfully about their experience. The fact that we had, what, 30 kids at the Youth Pride speakout is nothing short of amazing. It is so inspirational to watch them find their voices.

As I think about the next stage in my life, I'm looking for sustainability and work with kids. I want always to be able to work with young people around gender and sexuality. I have to find work that will support me while I'm being trained as a counselor.

EB: What are you proudest of in your time at Outright?

CK: I'm really proud of the trust and

community we've built as a team of staff, youth, and adult volunteers. And we're doing more work with more youth than ever before. When the previous staff had left, there were only a few kids, and we mostly saw them on Friday nights. Now we're seeing kids all the time, every day, three evenings a week, and 20 to 30 kids on a Friday night. There's now a group happening in Brattleboro and one in Montpelier. We're building community foundations for a very active group of youth. Outright is their place where they get to make choices.

The reason I don't like the title "Direct Services Coordinator" is that I don't 'provide' 'services' in some off-the-shelf programmatic way. I help youth build relationships and create community.

EB: What do you most regret about leaving?

CK: I will miss them terribly. Losing the daily interaction with those incredible youth will be painful. Do you know the book *Harriet the Spy*? In it there's a governess called "Ole Golly" and Harriet is always very anxious about her leaving. And Ole Golly says, I'm paraphrasing, "Someday you will be ready to be on your own and I will leave. But that day is not this day, so let's see what we can do with this day."

It's time to take responsibility for myself. I can't be Peter Pan, always looking for Wendy. Peter Pan needs to learn he can make it on his own. He doesn't need to lose his childhood wonder at the world. ▼

Pride at Work

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action, and we didn't get it, so the resolution [to support civil unions] just lay there."

Asked why, in Vermont, where civil unions and lesbian and gay civil rights are law and equal treatment is spreading, there would be a need for an LGBT organizing initiative, Belville said he was unaware of any specific problems around gay issues within the union structure. But, he said, "There can be plenty of laws on the books to prevent discrimination, but if you, the worker, are unaware of them or don't know where to turn for help, then the laws may not do much good. We have to educate people in order to protect the laws."

Tenaya Lafore, of the Vermont Workers Center agreed, "People still get discriminated against and harassed at work. One woman in Rutland was fired for wearing a tee shirt that said 'Chick Magnet.' LGBT workers might be accused of sexually harassing others or be isolated and harassed themselves. Pride at Work is trying to build bridges of support between these two communities."

The two unions with the largest Vermont presence are the National Education Association (NEA) and the Vermont State Employees Association (VSEA) with roughly 7,000 and 5,000 Vermont members, respectively. Other unions with significant Vermont populations include the Teamsters, the Independent Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, American Federation of State and Municipal Employees, and the American Federation of Teachers.

Current PAW chapters include urban centers such as Boston, Miami, Seattle, and Los Angeles, as well as smaller chapters in New England in Connecticut and Rhode

Island. A chapter is also forming in New Hampshire. Each PAW chapter is required to include representation from three AFL-CIO affiliated unions as a condition for chapter certification.

Nationally, Pride at Work has organized opposition to anti-gay resolutions at corporate annual meetings, such as AT&T's and ExxonMobil's efforts to delete specific gender and orientation protections and domestic partner benefits from their policies.

Hans Johnson, Co-Vice President of the Baltimore-DC Chapter, will facilitate the organization drive here in Vermont. On June 12th Johnson met with staff and volunteers of the Vermont Workers Center in Montpelier to plan a kick-off meeting for this organization drive.

With their parallel histories of commitment to social and economic justice, Johnson sees an affiliation of the union movement with LGBT workers as a natural fit. While he noted that Pride at Work is dedicated to making unions "more responsive, supportive, and respectful to LGBT members," non-union "members at large" are welcome and encouraged to participate in local PAW chapters, too.

The organizational meeting for the Vermont Chapter of Pride at Work will be held Tuesday, July 30th at 6:30 at the Vermont Workers Center at 38 State Street in Montpelier. Tom Barbera, Regional Vice President for PAW from Boston, will join Johnson in introducing Pride at Work to Vermonters. All are welcome to attend. More information is available from Tenaya Lafore at tenayapapaya@hotmail.com, or at 223-5057. You can check out the Pride at Work website at www.prideatwork.org. ▼