

Christ Church Presbyterian Struggles to Spread Light.

BY STACEY HORN

When leaders of LGBT organizations in Vermont met at the Queer Summit last month, Glen Gross came to represent Christ Church Presbyterian (CCP), the little red brick church located next to the water tower on UVM's Redstone campus. Gross, who has been a member and an elder at the church for three years, brought the tale of CCP's conflicts within the Presbyterian denominational hierarchy for its "More Light" statement.

The church's policy declares: "CCP is a 'More Light'

sexual orientation" and "full participation in the life, membership and leadership" (emphasis added) are the ones that trouble the Presbyterian hierarchy.

This statement has been interpreted by other churches within the Presbyterian denomination as a declaration of the local church's disregard for the requirements for leadership in the church as outlined in the Presbyterian constitution, the *Book of Order*. This collection of policies stipulates that candidates for leadership must "live either in fidelity within the covenant of a marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness. Persons refus-

recalls, "The issue had been boiling for years." The "More Light" statement had been framed in 1984 and a task force was formed to "seek more light on sexuality and spirituality, discriminatory laws and mores against persons because of their sexual orientation, and homophobia within our spiritual community and our society."

Local church members publicized their welcoming message to the local LGBT community. At the time, only a few Presbyterian churches had adopted "More Light" statements. According to Wolvington, "We lost a handful of members over the issue in '84, but it's been years since we lost a member over [LGBT

rebuks occurred in April of 2002, when the Presbytery of Shenango, PA petitioned the denomination's General Assembly to order the Presbytery of Northern New England, which has supervisory and pastoral authority over the local churches within its territory, to compel CCP to "rescind its statements against the *Book of Order*." The Shenango petition called for the replacement of the congregation's governing body and the removal its co-pastors, Mike Brown and Becky Strader, if the Presbytery could not compel CCP to comply.

The previous attempt came two years ago in July, when a church in Londonderry, NH filed a complaint against the Presbytery of Northern New England, alleging that the supervisory body had not taken sufficient action against the Burlington church for its statements that it was opposed to and could not comply with Amendment B.

In that case, the General Assembly's Permanent Judicial Commission also ruled that there was no evidence that CCP had violated the *Book of Order*. Nevertheless, the Presbytery was ordered to warn the church about the consequences of such a violation.

The statements under fire included a resolution passed by the local church in 1997 - "We vigorously protest passage of Amendment B ... as a thinly disguised and dramatic reflection of the Presbyterian Church's hypocrisy regarding inclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Christians in the full life of the church" - and a 1998 report that, "sadly, we have not found a way to be in compliance with Amendment B without harming deeply the church community that we are called to lead."

In response to the Shenango petition and growing tensions around "More Light" issues within the Presbyterian Church nationally, Burlington's church issued a statement in June that it had "set aside" its 1997 Resolution of Dissent and 1998 Report to Presbytery regarding Amendment B. Church leaders explained that the congregation's intent was to "clarify and strengthen" its statement of conviction.

Co-pastor Becky Strader explained, "We took a step of pru-

dence that took away the red flag." As Glen Gross noted, "Nothing else is happening in the church [nationally] because of this issue." Because the Shenango petition presented no hard evidence that CCP had actually violated the *Book of Order*, the Presbyterian General Assembly voted to take no action. Strader said simply, "We had not violated any order, and the General Assembly saw that."

But the church is not backing off, Strader insists. "There is absolutely no question whether we'll continue to be a More Light church. That's still our statement." Wolvington adds, "We're determined to see the denomination change. We know that it will."

CCP is looking for ways to remain a "More Light" church while demonstrating compliance with the denomination's constitution. Co-pastor Brown explains, "We are working, as promised, on clarifying and sharpening our statement regarding how we will relate to [Amendment] B."

Gross and Wolvington both emphasize that Burlington's church has gained strength from the support of the Presbytery of Northern New England. While focusing on acceptance of a "More Light" stance within the Presbyterian denomination as the church's major goal, local church members have also been active in LGBT missions such as supporting the enactment of the Civil Union law, and participating in the Vermont Freedom to Marry Coalition, the Board of Directors for Outright Vermont, and Vermont's Pride Festival.

Co-pastor Mike Brown concluded by issuing an open invitation. "We at Christ Church Presbyterian understand the hospitality and inclusiveness of Jesus to be the most important guide to how we come across as a congregation. Jesus does not seem to have insisted that anyone become something he or she is not in order to tag along on the journey. This congregation may not be everyone's cup of tea, but you will probably not be able to say that it's the same old thing you've always found in church." ▼

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CCP policy statement**

left: co-pastors Mike Brown and Becky Strader. Christ Church, beside landmark water tower.

church. We welcome all persons regardless of sexual orientation, into full participation in the life, membership, and leadership of this church, and strive, as part of the Body of Christ, to reach out in ministry to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people both within and outside of our congregation."

The phrases "regardless of

ing to repent of any self-acknowledged practice which the confessions call sin shall not be ordained and/or installed as deacons, elders, or ministers of the Word and Sacrament."

This stipulation, commonly referred to as Amendment B, was voted into effect on April 20, 1997, but Ken Wolvington, an elder and longtime member of the local church

issues.]"

While CCP's membership has remained committed to "More Light," other Presbyterian churches have challenged their stance. The little church on the hill in Burlington has twice been the object of attempted reprimands through a denominational process.

The most recent attempted