

## community profile

BY BOB WOLFF

A casual observer might be excused for thinking that there is now a designated "lesbian seat" at the ministerial table at St. Paul's (Episcopal) Cathedral in Burlington. After all, the Cathedral broke new ground five years ago by hiring out lesbian Martha Dyson as a priest (prior to that, out gay or lesbian priests had served the Cathedral, but they came out after they had begun work there). And now they've hired another, Tanya Wallace, who came to Vermont nine months ago to become the cathedral's Canon Educator (a canon, in this case, refers to any clergy person working at a cathedral).

But that observer would be wrong. According to Scottie Ginn, a lesbian member of the Vestry (the lay governing body of the church), they took care to ensure that they had assembled a diverse list of candidates – in race, age, sexual orientation, and place of birth – before the selection process started. It was simple, says Ginn: "Tanya was the best candidate."

A New Englander, born 31 years ago in Greenfield, northwestern Massachusetts, Rev. Wallace resides in South Burlington with Kathleen West, her beloved partner of 7 years. The two were united in a commitment ceremony in New York City in 1999, and celebrated their civil union just last month.

Asked about her acceptance of the post at St. Paul's Cathedral, Wallace wrote in an e-mail, "I accepted St. Paul's call because by the time the call was offered, I had discerned that God was truly calling me to serve here. The position description felt like it was written for me – the perfect combination of my skills and passions. The people here are so deeply committed to their faith, to social justice and education, to growth in all ways, to leadership in the community, to all that a church at its best should be. And the Dean, Ken Poppe, is an exceptional leader with whom I am thrilled to have the opportunity to serve."

The new Canon Educator is a committed, passionate bridge-builder, a pro-active proponent, cheerleader and facilitator for ever-improved relationships between people, faiths, generations, ethnicities, and orientations. Actually, if one can think of two or more groups or organizational entities that might not understand each other well or be in need of reconciling, it is likely that Rev. Tanya has already thought about facilitating them toward better, enriched relationships. Some clergy – even mainline Protestant pastors, at least one rabbi, and divinity school professors – have been known to preach that this is queer folks' role in our culture – to bring right relationship between people and God. Clearly Canon Wallace is aiming toward fulfilling this goal. Justice, says Wallace, is at the very center of her ministry.

She is directly responsible for overseeing, developing and supporting the LGBT ministry at St. Paul's, among other duties. Before Wallace arrived at St. Paul's the LGBT ministry was an important and well-attended activity in the Burlington community under the guidance of the previous Canon Pastor, the Rev. Martha Dyson and the lay leadership of Larry Rudiger and Elizabeth Stedman, who continued it after Dyson moved on to other activities.

The most visible aspect of the LGBT ministry at St. Paul's is the schedule of monthly potlucks on the third Friday of each month at 6:30 PM in the social hall of the Cathedral. The potlucks are open to all, regardless of membership in St. Paul's or any religious body – or none. The dinner gathering is a safe, smoke-free space to meet others in the LGBTQA and questioning community. Informal discussions and worship are built into the potluck format. Those attending for the first time are not expected to bring food.

Although in the past churches have turned LGBTQA folks away – if not through confrontation, then with silence on LGBTQA

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**GOD BLESS THE GLBTQs!**

## Lesbian Priest Tanya Wallace Answers the Call at St. Paul's

issues – Wallace and others are teaching a theology that stresses queer people's unique gifts to God and society, to individuals in relationships, to health services activity, to education and other areas of life. These religious leaders are way beyond "tolerance" of queer people; they are leading their flocks toward honoring, treasuring and celebrating all kinds of diversity, including sexual and gender identification diversity. Some are standing with members of the lesbian and gay community as they press for full marriage rights.

As Wallace looks back on her life, she sees that everything she has done since early childhood contributes to her bridge-building, community-focused, justice-centered work. Since at 31, she is younger than most priests, she hopes she can build a connection with young people. As a child she was part of a big family that housed four generations under one roof, circumstances that have taught her to be a peace-maker and bridge-builder.

Wallace attended Union Theological Seminary, an interdenominational seminary, where she met clergy-in-training from many Christian denominations with differing beliefs and ways of governing. She says that the experience of working with peers from different Christian faiths also prepared her for her bridge-building roles: between lesbians and non-lesbians, the queer community and the patriarchy, and in college between secular feminists in women's studies and religious individuals and groups.

While at Union, Wallace became friends with seminarians who were called to ministry by the Universal Fellowship of the Metropolitan Community Church, the only Christian denomination that was founded and continues to minister to the lesbian and gay community. And although the denomination is different, Wallace holds the same certainty that queer people are an integral, necessary part of God's plan. "God don't make mistakes," as The Rev. Troy Perry, founder and moderator of UFMCC often says.

Wallace has a clear message: "St.

Paul's doors are open to all LGBTQA people, their family and friends." She is determined to keep St. Paul's a safe place for members of the LGBT community.

"Ours is a world that encourages material wealth, individual power and success, and perpetuates sexism, ageism, racism, heterosexism ... and ours is a church that draws people into community, challenges and even critiques the dominant paradigm of power, strives for communal knowledge and spiritual well-being, and confronts the evil which perpetuates separation and sin which we call injustice."

Canon Wallace's days and parts of her nights are filled with the tasks of helping people come closer to God through Christ, whether through pastoral care, parish life, LGBTQA ministry, clergy, and newcomer's ministries or young adult ministries, church school, and youth groups. She does a lot of work for and with young people. Scottie Ginn said that Tanya Wallace's skills at working with children were one of the important reasons the cathedral hired her.

Asked about her work with children, Wallace declared, "Children are so often considered the 'church of the future,' but they're not – they're the church of today. As an essential part of the church community, children teach us so much about the love of God, challenge us to articulate our faith in understandable ways, and help us to take life a little less seriously. Children understand God's love firsthand, and in many ways invite us to relearn that understanding."

When the collar and vestments come off, Tanya Wallace follows the New York Liberty WNBA team. In Burlington she enjoys the games of the UVM women's basketball team. She and her partner Kathy enjoy exploring Vermont towns on day trips and attending films: "One of my favorite films is *Strangers in Good Company*, a little-known Canadian film, done documentary-style, about a group of elderly women who come to know each other by sharing their life stories. I also love any movie and almost any TV show shot on location in

New York City."

In an email she revealed that she was once hired as a consultant for HBO's *Sex and the City*. "They needed to do a baptism scene, and I had to teach Sarah Jessica Parker how to hold the baby for the baptism, and teach the 'priest' how to pour the water." The couple even loaned their apartment to the NBC show *Third Watch* to film an episode with Roy Scheider.

Tanya hopes to do some cross-country skiing next winter after she has settled more into her ministry. She is passionate about many types of music: pop, jazz, folk and others. She loves water, swimming, and Kathleen's Italian cooking. Since Kathy and Tanya have been in Vermont they have attended concerts by Indigo Girls, Shawn Colvin, Lucie Blue Tremblay, and Vermont Symphony Orchestra concerts outdoors at Shelburne Farms and the Trapp Family Lodge. They have two cats – Nashville and Juno.

St. Paul's LGBT programming slated for 2003 includes a Gay Pride Evensong with a guest preacher early in the afternoon on Pride Festival Day, June 14. An LGBT retreat is in the planning – perhaps a long weekend centered on thoughtful Christian responses to Biblical passages sometimes used as anti-gay ammunition.

Wallace's response to a question about what being a priest means to her reveals her religious devotion: "As a priest, everything I do begins and ends at the altar – to offer the reconciling body and blood of Christ to anyone who desires it, to gather people in community where our deepest needs, passions, concerns meet to move into the world and do the work of Christ." ▼

For information on the potluck dinner, check this month's Calendar. Bob Wolff is a theatrical and performance space designer who lives and writes in Randolph.