



Queering the Churches Panel Discusses Challenges and Problems

R.U.1.2's Khristian Kemp-DeLisser opens the discussion. Seated behind him are (l to r) Ken Wolvington, Lil Verner, Stacey Horn, Liz Steadman, and Euan Bear.

BY JUDITH BECKETT

On Friday July 18 five members of a discussion panel, "Changing Minds, Changing Religious Communities: LGBT issues and religion," met at Christ Church Presbyterian on the University of Vermont Campus to talk about communities of faith and LGBT people. The program was sponsored by R.U.1.2? and Christ Church Presbyterian. Khristian Kemp-DeLisser of R.U.1.2? was the moderator.

Lil Verner, the first speaker, was co-founder of an area chapter of Parents, Family, & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Working with the Freedom to Marry Task Force, she testified in Montpelier in behalf of Civil Unions. In addition, she is working for full inclusion of LGBT persons in the United Methodist Church. Verner described the governing structure of the Methodist Church and outlined the history of the Methodist position on inclusivity. She concluded that she believes that her church will not change to include LGBT people "in the near future" but said

"I am going to see it through." When asked why she remains within the church, she responded, "I'm the flea that makes the dog scratch."

Ken Wolvington, the second speaker, is a life-long Presbyterian and an elder in Christ Church, Presbyterian (CCP). He has served on the board of Outright Vermont and testified in support of Civil Unions. He also served on the Board of Directors of the National More Light Church Network. More Light Presbyterians believe that God continues to shed new light on the teachings of Jesus and work toward full participation of LGBT people in the life and ministry of their church.

Wolvington spoke about the long-standing conflict between CCP and the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. (PCUSA) that began in 1984 when Christ Church declared itself a More Light Church. Since unanimously adopting a resolution of dissent in 1997 against constitutional Amendment B prohibiting the ordination of GLBT members, CCP has been threatened with having their pastors dismissed and the church taken over by an administrative commission.

Through a complex and nonintuitive

interpretation of the problematic clause, CCP has now announced to the denomination that it is in compliance with the provision, while still welcoming LGBTQ people to full participation in worship and leadership. Wolvington does not foresee a change but rather a north-south split in his church around the issue.

Stacey Horne, a choir member and an elder at CCP who has served on the Youth Advisory Board of the Presbytery of Northern New England, spoke next. Recently returned from the 215th PCUSA General Assembly in Colorado, Horne believes that the Presbyterian Church will change because of the strong queer presence in the church and because youth, who are being heavily recruited for the seminary by a church that is short 4,000 pastors, are demanding it.

Elizabeth Stedman is a postulant for Holy Orders in the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont. Stedman spoke of the need for progressive and left-leaning Christians to reclaim from the religious right what she called "hi-jacked Christian concepts" and moral authority. She believes that progressive and main line churches need to be strong activists and that "queer people of faith and

their friends" need to articulate their beliefs, link them to their lives of faith, and make them public. They need to "come out" as Christians and bear witness.

She asked for more "evangelism" (another hijacked concept) among liberal church members so that like-minded people can find each other and build community. She reported that the Episcopal Church is now struggling with whether or not to include a blessing for same sex unions in the Book of Common Prayer that guides their liturgy. The Vermont Episcopal Church is leading the way by using the legalization of same-sex unions to hasten the necessary changes.

Euan Bear, a longtime political activist and currently editor of *Out in the Mountains* (but not representing the paper), identified herself as the "skeptic" on the panel. She said she grew up in the United Church of Christ but became a fervent born-again Christian after graduation from high school. In college, she became an expert at "witnessing" her faith, but when she and a female lover founded the second college gay-straight alliance in Maine, they were prayed over, preached at, and finally asked to leave their prayer group because they refused to "repent."

Bear referred to the "holocaust of persecution of the last 1000 years" suffered by LGBT people and said the churches must apologize for their complicity in the "suppression, torture and death" of our people. She characterized as "arrogant" that churches vote on whether they will "allow us" to name ourselves aloud in their churches or whether our relationships are worthy of the word "marriage."

She suggested that churches doing outreach to the LGBT communities should consider providing financial and volunteer support for the LGBT political and health organizations that have sustained us spiritually for decades. Finally, she asked if we really need a church to find the "spirit that moves us" and to do the good work we do.

Khristian Kemp-DeLisser as moderator had the last word, reminding us that, while the panel members were friendly to the GLBT community, for many of us organized religion is a source of shame, stigma, and rejection. He added that the GLBT community includes many individuals of other religious traditions not represented on the panel such as Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist and pagan.

The small audience of thirteen reflected a diversity of age, race, sexual preference, and spiritual persuasion that sparked a lively discussion during the reception that followed. Kemp-DeLisser and Horn indicated that they hoped this would be the first in a series of community discussions on religion and the LGBT community. ▼

Vermont Exxon-Mobil Proxy Votes Cancel Out

Two different fund managers handling Vermont retirement funds voted "180 degrees opposite" last May on whether Exxon-Mobil should restore a Mobil Corporation lesbian, gay and transgender anti-discrimination policy, according to State Treasurer Job Spaulding. The initiative was defeated when 27 percent of shareholder proxies were voted in favor, leaving Exxon-Mobil as one of just 10 Fortune 100 companies without an anti-discrimination policy. Voting share proxies in a con-

scious and deliberate manner to advance state economic and social interests was a campaign issue for Spaulding in the 2002 election.

The management of the retirement funds for teachers and state employees rests with the Treasurer's office, but the fiduciary responsibility is vested in each fund's board of directors, Spaulding explained. He had begun a discussion with the state employees' retirement fund board regarding voting proxies in February, he said. "But it's a long educa-

tional process."

In search of examples to illustrate why Vermont's shares should be actively voted, Spaulding said he called various fund managers to find out how they had voted on several questions during annual meetings this spring. He discovered that two different fund managers for the teachers' retirement fund had voted in opposite ways on the Exxon-Mobil anti-discrimination policy question — one voted for and one against.

Spaulding noted that nondis-

crimination language is state policy and law. "I find it inappropriate that a fund manager would vote against such a policy. I regret that we didn't get this going in time to have an impact on this vote," he said. "I didn't know I'd have this opportunity to impact an issue of importance for the gay and lesbian community. I was unpleasantly surprised," he added, to find that some proxies had been voted against inclusive policies.

Some proxy issues are strictly money-management related (such as "expensing stock options"), and "some are just the right thing to do," he said.

The opposite votes by separate

fund managers demonstrated that the state "does not have a defensible policy," Spaulding said. The board governing the state employees' retirement fund has authorized the Treasurer's office to search for a firm (through a bid process) to help the state develop proxy-voting guidelines and to monitor and audit the proxy voting of fund managers.

Spaulding was meeting with the state teachers' retirement fund board as *OTM* went to press. He planned to seek that board's support for a similar effort. ▼