

Equality in the Kingdom

'Open & Affirming' Spreads in Northeastern VT

BY STACEY HORN

When the Vermont Conference of the United Church of Christ voted in 2002 to be "Open and Affirming," it was a bold step for the largest Protestant denomination in the state. It was a declaration of equality for all parishioners, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender members.

Then came the wait to see whether and how many individual congregations would follow suit. As of press time, 16 (10 percent) have voted to identify as "Open and Affirming."

The next church to consider such a declaration is in the heart of the Northeast Kingdom, not known as the most gay-friendly area of Vermont.

Members of North Congregational Church in St. Johnsbury will vote on whether to become Open and Affirming at their annual meeting in March. Pastor Jay Sprout expects the outcome to be positive. Surveys of the congregation and meetings over the past year have shown almost unanimous support, but Sprout conceded that those attending the meetings "were strongly in favor of the issue," and that dissenters may have opted not to participate.

Sprout does not expect, however, that North Church will lose members over this issue. He said that the church has been moving toward greater inclusiveness over the past several years, and although "there have been a few losses, we've experienced many gains." The church's membership has remained steady at around 259 for the past three years. According to Sprout, the choice to become Open and Affirming is consistent with North Church's theology, and some members have expressed concern that "unless you make a stand that specifically states you're welcoming, a lot of people are going to associate you with the rejecting side of the church."

If North Church votes to become Open and Affirming, Sprout explained, the church will adopt a statement that welcomes all people "to participate in every opportunity to worship and serve God." Sprout added, "We intentionally worded it in such a way to not exclude the pulpit," though he said that considering a gay pastor "would raise the question in new dimensions" for members of North Church.

"We are hoping to have 20 [Open and Affirming] churches by the end of this year. At the moment we have just one in the Northeast Kingdom," said Rev. Arnold Thomas, the Vermont

Rev. Llewellyn and his partner were joined in civil union days after moving to Vermont and now reside in the parsonage in Danville. They had already had a commitment ceremony in their previous home of Oakland, California. The move to rural Vermont has been an adjustment, but, Llewellyn said, "for a little church in the hills of Vermont in a very conservative area, Danville is quite surprising."

According to Llewellyn, Danville's semi-isolation has actually made its citizens more likely to accept difference. He explained, "Until recently, if the community shunned you, it was difficult to survive" in the harsh, sparsely populated Northeast Kingdom. "When families had children that turned out to be gay, they weren't shunned." There would have been no nearby towns or cities for them to go to. "This has created a situation here where the gay people haven't left," Llewellyn said, making it impossible to "live under the assumption that there are no gay people in

North Church may vote to adopt a statement that welcomes all people "to participate in every opportunity to worship and serve God" – including from the pulpit.

Conference Minister for the United Church of Christ. That one is the Danville Congregational Church. And, by the way, its pastor is a gay man.

Reverend James Llewellyn explained that the church, which became Open and Affirming in February of 2002, did not set out to hire a gay pastor: "The search committee told me, 'We set out to hire the best person for the job. He turned out to be gay.'" Llewellyn became pastor of Danville Congregational in August of 2003. After completing seminary, Llewellyn identified himself as a gay man on the profile he sent to approximately 400 churches. He interviewed with about half a dozen. Llewellyn speculated, "If I had not disclosed on the profile I would have gotten more responses."

town."

With 156 active members, Danville Congregational Church is the largest in town (population 2100). It maintains strong ecumenical relationships with nearby churches of other denominations, collaborating on events and activities such as Vacation Bible School, a thrift store, and a food shelf. According to Llewellyn, members of Danville Congregational have an "openness to new ideas" that is reflected in their theology and social action.

And, soon, Danville Congregational may be joined by another Open and Affirming voice in the Kingdom. ▼

Stacey Horn teaches at Champlain College and is active in the Presbyterian Church.

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