

BY STACEY HORN

Colchester – Professor Jeffrey Trumbower, a gay man and a Unitarian, has been appointed dean of St. Michael's College, a Catholic school established in 1904 by the Society of Saint Edmund, a French order of Catholic priests.

Trumbower, who holds a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago Divinity School, currently chairs the Religious Studies Department at St. Mike's, where he has been on the faculty for 16 years. Though he is not the first non-Catholic to be dean of the college, he is the first openly gay man in the position. In his experience, Trumbower said, St. Mike's has always shown a dedication to non-discriminatory hiring practices and an environment of tolerance on campus: "The climate has always been wonderful. I have never experienced any kind of discrimination." In fact, the college adopted a non-discrimination clause that includes sexual orientation in the early 1990s – before Vermont law required it.

According to search committee chair and political science professor Bill Grover, "We were very fortunate to have two terrific people [apply] and Jeff rose to the top." Grover said that religion was not a factor in choosing the dean and that the committee wanted a candidate who would "fit with the overall mission of the college." Of Trumbower, Grover said, "He's going to be a terrific dean."

Trumbower said that he expects to work closely with the faculty curriculum committee this fall. "The current curriculum has been in place for ten years, and it will be my job to manage conversation and raise issues" about possible changes, Trumbower explained, adding that it is his responsibility to oversee the committee, but not to dictate its actions.

Faculty evaluation will be another of Trumbower's focuses. During his time at the college, Trumbower has seen the role of faculty change. He said, "The goal now is that we are teacher-scholars. Academically, expectations for faculty have become higher." Faculty members now take on somewhat smaller teaching loads to allow them to publish and remain active in their fields. "Expectations for



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**Newly appointed SMC Dean
Jeffrey Trumbower**

Outside the Box

Gay Unitarian Appointed St. Mike's Dean

tenure are not as high as at a research university. We don't expect that kind of quantity," Trumbower said, "but we expect quality."

Trumbower acknowledged that being dean will leave him less time for his own scholarship, but he plans to maintain his work in the field of religious studies. He finished his last major book project in 2001. Titled *Rescue for the Dead: The Posthumous Salvation of Non-Christians in Early Christianity* and published by Oxford Press, the book discusses the early Christian practice of saving the souls of deceased friends and relatives

by praying for them. Currently, he is working on a project about Jewish sectarian logic. "It is appealing," he said, "to understand the roots of tradition."

The newly appointed dean traces his own roots to Florida, where he was raised Episcopalian. He said he was drawn to "the atmosphere of mystery" but curious about what lay behind that mystery. "In terms of content," he said, "we hardly ever cracked open the Bible." Trumbower said he has "never felt oppressed by religious traditions," but he has always been interested in the "various voices" within different traditions, includ-

ing the voices of "marginalized groups."

Trumbower went to college at Vanderbilt in Nashville, where he majored in Spanish and Political Science. He took four religious studies courses and found the field "such a turn-on" that he wanted to pursue graduate work. He graduated from Vanderbilt in 1982.

Before going on to graduate studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School, Trumbower completed a year of service with the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. He worked with an outreach program for the elderly in Albuquerque, New Mexico, coordinating services between different churches. As a Protestant, Trumbower was delegated "to approach various Protestant churches and see if they would be a part of our network." Similar to the position he now holds at St. Mike's, Trumbower mused, he was "a non-Catholic in a Catholic setting."

Trumbower came to St. Mike's in 1989, after completing his dissertation. He was not familiar with the area before he came, and when he arrived, he "started going to the church at the head of church street. I resonated with that community and realized that I was home spiritually." Trumbower met his partner here in

Vermont. They have been together for ten years.

In addition to overseeing curriculum and faculty development, Trumbower especially looks forward to continuing to work with students: "A huge percentage of our students are involved in social justice activities. This aspect of the college is really great. I see that continuing."

During his time at the college, Trumbower has also attended some meetings and events sponsored by Ally, a student-led group that identifies itself as a "gay-straight alliance." Mike McCaffrey, a member of Ally, said that Trumbower's appointment "shows a dedication that St. Mike's has that other institutions might not. I think it will definitely open up some doors for not only him but for other LGBT students and staff."

Jeff Trumbower, the gay Unitarian religious studies professor, will assume his new position as dean of the Catholic college of St. Michael's on July 1. ▼

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