

BY EUAN BEAR

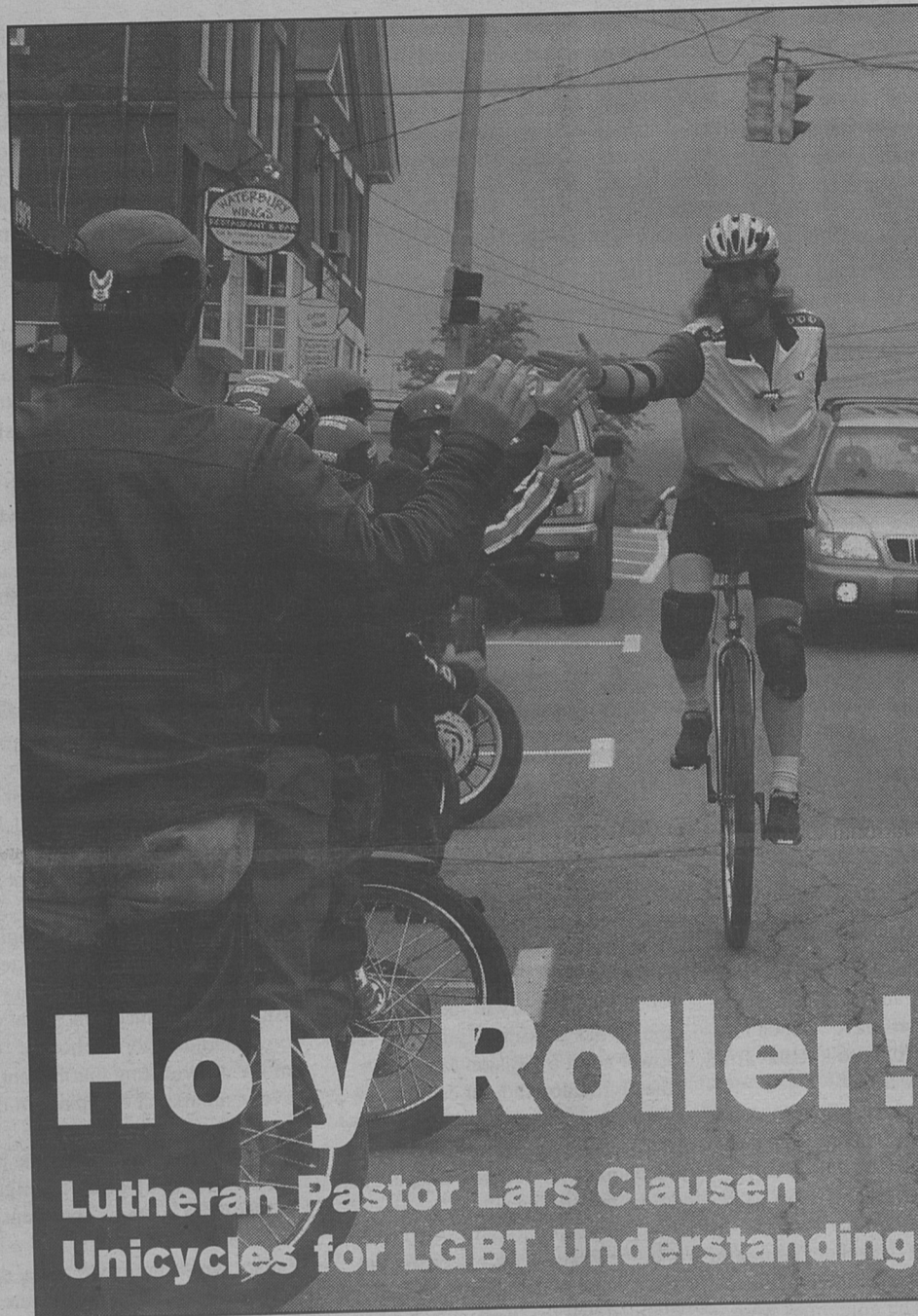
**W**aterbury – Somehow we missed connecting in Burlington, but *OITM* caught up with unicycling Lutheran pastor Lars Clausen in Waterbury on June 16 before he set off for Montpelier and points south. Here's the pitch: he's a straight man married to a woman, has two children, is ordained in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, and he is riding his unicycle from Burlington to Baltimore to understand what everyday life is like for gay men, lesbians, and transgender folks in this part of America.

His Viking-long sandy-reddish-blond hair and blue-blue eyes peering out from under a bike helmet don't immediately evoke ministerial robes behind a pulpit, and that is not, he says, the only place for a pastor. It's clearly not the only place for this pastor, who is on this trip, he explains, in part "because I was kicked out of seminary in 1988." That's shorthand for a much longer story (see the "About Lars" section of his website, [www.straightintogayamerica.com](http://www.straightintogayamerica.com)), but it was an experience that gave him a taste of how gay and lesbian Lutherans might feel when confronted with rules that exclude them from roles in the ministry.

The issue was that he and his cohabiting then-fiancé were not married. They were required to move their marriage up by several months to satisfy the seminary authorities.

"I was angry for four years," Lars said. "But then I came to see that as the biggest gift. I no longer assume that institutions will eventually do the right thing. More and more, I see institutions allow people on the edge of society to fall off. Jesus was all about going after the one sheep out on the edge."

Lars – in his bike gear it's difficult to think of him as Pastor Clausen – and his wife Anne have made lots of LGBT friends in the 17 years since seminary, including on Lars' 50-state unicycle trip a few years ago, about which he wrote a book, *One Wheel, Many Spokes*. He wants to use his relatively privileged position as a white, heterosexual, professionally educated, married father and minister to move the conversation about justice and equality forward. He is not – NOT – using



## Holy Roller!

### Lutheran Pastor Lars Clausen Unicycles for LGBT Understanding

the trip to preach to anyone, gay or straight.

"It's only the third day of the trip, and already we've received a ton of positive energy," Lars said. "I understand that some members of the LGBT community might say, 'What are you doing? Who do you think you are?' There have been so many [people] who are allies in word and not in deed." Lars wants to make sure that his actions as an ally are deeds that

add a small measure of energy toward a "tipping point" where the churches and society "finally realize, we must include and treat justly LGBT people. This I can do."

Already, Lars realizes, "LGBT people are networked." He's staying at the homes of people who invite him – whether because they heard about his previous trip and book, have been to his website, or because the last people he

stayed with handed him on to friends down the road.

He keeps a running account of each day's adventures on his website. Since I saw him, he has encountered just a few of the Vermonters who subscribe to the "Take Back Vermont" opposition to civil unions. The strength of their feeling and the lack of logic Lars notes in their responses are stunning.

Right now, the trip is self-funded, though he spoke with representatives of Ben & Jerry's in search of support. Sales of his book will help, as will donations through his website.

Why Vermont? I asked. Why the East Coast? "It's historically appropriate to begin here, the first state to recognize civil unions." Depending on the support he gets, including monetary support ("I'm having a ball, but it comes at a price," of not seeing his family for the five weeks of the trip), and seeing that the trip was "of some use" while being able to "feed the family," he might like to undertake a ride in the Midwest, or Canada. To counter red-state/blue-state mindsets, he tells the story of a pastor from Tennessee who was visiting the small village of Holden, Washington, where the Clausens have been living. The Tennessee man said his whole synod voted to be identified as "Reconciled in Christ, – in concept akin to other denominations' language of 'Open and Affirming,' 'More Light' – indicating full acceptance of LGBT members at all levels.

By the time you read this, Lars Clausen will have seen Pride in Manhattan and will be close to finishing when he rides to Lynchburg, Virginia on July 10 to worship at Jerry Falwell's church, before turning north again to Baltimore and his flight home. Everything else between here and there is a gift of the moment and of the people he meets. His real goal is the conversations with us, the gay men and lesbians and transgender folk whose stories he wants to hear and retell, bringing real lives to people caught in fear who might listen to a straight white Lutheran pastor when he says, "I have met them and here are their stories. They are real souls, real lives, and not so different from you and me. They deserve nothing less than justice." ▼

## MAKING THE MOVIE

**J**enny Ting unloads a medium-sized duffel holding her camera gear from the car and walks into Full of Beans, the coffee shop in downtown Waterbury where Lars and I agreed to meet. She is half of the documentary film crew following Lars Clausen's perhaps

quixotic unicycle journey into "gay America."

Ting saw a brief article about Clausen in the national glossy gay magazine, *The Advocate* last April, and within a matter of a few weeks, she was on a plane to Burlington. This wasn't the next film she

had planned to make – that film would have been on gay marriage, with interviews of five gay and five straight couples, "people who represent what marriage means."

Then she saw the article about Lars. "Here's this straight white guy, a Lutheran pastor, talking about justice for LGBT people. I wanted to be a part of it," Ting explains as she

allows an interruption to her fast and furious emailing.

Ting – a civil engineer for a private transportation consultant and a lesbian – and Tan Vo, her co-documentarian, are, like Lars, self-funding this venture. Their last film, *Not Straightforward*, documented ten days and ten different women. It's been shown in New Zealand, Switzerland, and the

Philippines, as well as in the U.S., Ting said.

This one might be harder, with many more stories, hundreds of hours of film, but, Ting says, "I know how I will frame Lars and his unicycle, 'Straight into GLBT America,' a title that's inclusive of all [our] people." ▼