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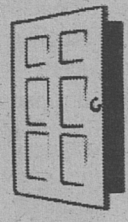
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Church Allies

UCC Votes for Open and Affirming

BY FRANCESCA SUSANNA

RANDOLPH — When the Reverend Pam Lucas explains the meaning of Christian marriage, she stresses that she speaks only for herself, what she believes and what her own understanding is. “Marriage in the eyes of God is a faithful, loving, committed, monogamous relationship between two people.” Lucas is the acting conference minister for the United Church of Christ’s Vermont Conference, following the resignation of the Rev. Arnold Thomas last spring. There are about 153 UCC congregations in Vermont, Lucas says, with a total of 16,000 members.

In June of 2002, the Vermont Conference voted to become an

not to vote, and have just educated themselves and are keeping the dialogue open for now.”

The UCC was formed in 1957 from five separate denominations (New England Congregationalists, German Evangelical and Reformed heritages, white American and African American Christian Churches, and ethnic churches organized by the American Missionary Association). They claim as their own the first ordained Black pastor, Lemuel Haynes (1785), as well as the first woman minister, Antoinette Brown (1853). In 1972 the UCC ordained William R. Johnson, the first openly gay man to be ordained. “That led to a conversation about what it means to be open and affirming to *all* people,” explains Lucas. “How do we offer the kind

ministry of Jesus Christ. “We commit ourselves to caring and concern for our lesbian, gay and bisexual sisters and brothers,” it reads.

In Vermont the conversation began in 1987 when the Vermont Conference voted to affirm the right of candidates to seek ordination as ministers without regard to their sexual orientation (*OITM* June, 1987). It continued in the late 90’s, when the affirming resolution was brought to the floor at an annual meeting by the church in Bennington, which had become an ONA church. “They had been through the process and were calling on the conference to do that,” Lucas says.

Flash forward to this summer: the General Synod (the national organizational body of the UCC) passes the Marriage Equality Resolution, which like every statement and resolution, is non-binding on any of the conferences or congregations. From Arnold Thomas, Vermont’s delegate, Lucas learned that three different resolutions were considered; one in support of marriage equality, one saying that marriage was between a man and a woman, and one in favor of continued study. Lucas reports, “The debate was impassioned but respectful, and the resolution won by an 80 per cent margin.”

In the aftermath of the General Synod vote, a UCC church in Virginia was the victim of arson; anti-gay graffiti was painted on that church’s wall.

“The feedback [to the marriage equality resolution] in Vermont has been very muted,” Lucas says. A few pastors have called her to let her know that each had a family leave their congregation over the issue. In other parts of the country there has been talk of churches wanting to leave the UCC and found another denomination.

This resolution made by a Christian denomination, together with the appearance of four area churches in this year’s Vermont Gay Pride Parade, illustrates a new tolerance for queers in Vermont. There is a place in Christianity for queer folk as well as a call to the GLBT community to make a place of openness and acceptance for GLBT Christians. ▼

Francesca Susanna is a freelance writer who lives in Burlington.

A few Vermont pastors have called Rev. Lucas to let her know that each had a family leave their congregation over the passage of the Marriage Equality Resolution at the General Synod.

open and affirming (ONA) conference in regards to the lgb community (there has been no apparent official comment regarding the status of transgenders in the UCC). What this means is that the conference will welcome gays, lesbians and bisexuals — as they are — for membership and leadership within the conference.

That said, within the UCC, every congregation and level of organization is autonomous. “We speak *to*, and not *for* one another,” Lucas says. Of the 153 Vermont congregations, 19 have voted to be ONA. “We’ve had the conversation in many churches and a number have decided for the moment

of hospitality that allows us to open our arms and gather everyone in and give everyone full rights and privileges to be who God calls them to be?”

The road to the 2002 Vermont Conference vote, and subsequent votes of individual churches, has been a solid twenty years’ journey. In July of 1985, after much prayer, study and discussion, the 15th General Synod adopted the Open and Affirming statement. This statement recognizes that people of all sexual orientations are welcome into the full life and ministry of the denomination and that GLBT people and their gifts are an essential part of the community and of the