

H.247 Commentary

By Reverend C. Irving Cummings
Re: Testimony Regarding the Passage of
Bill H247 From Committee to the House
Floor

March 10, 1987

My name is Irving Cummings. I am an ordained clergyman in the United Church of Christ, and was trained for the ministry at Harvard University Divinity School. I am the pastor of a church in the Vermont Conference, and also serve as a social worker at the Counseling Service of Addison County.

I regret that so many of my brothers and sisters in Christ have left this meeting already. I feel strongly that they need to hear what it is that I have to say.* I had not planned to speak at all this evening, but because I am a follower of Jesus, I am compelled to speak.

There have been many things said at this assembly this evening, in the name of Jesus Christ, and many of them are simply untrue. The Bible has been misquoted, quoted out of context, flippantly, causally, and with little care of regard for its real meaning.

It has been said here tonight that Jesus has spoken clearly on the matter of homosexuality. That is untrue. Jesus never said a single word about it, that we know of. He simply never addressed the issue.

It is true that there are about five references in Holy Writ which seem to be, could be, might be, conceivably are, possibly are condemnations about something like what we might now call "homosexuality". A previous speaker has noted that the story of Sodom, about which we have heard much this evening, is really about the sin of inhospitality. [We know, at least, that this is how Jesus understood it, for upon the sole occasion within which he made reference to it, he was instructing the disciples as to how they should behave if they went to a town which refused to accept them. "It will be worse for that town, on the day of Judgement," he said, "than it was for Sodom."]*

It is also true that there are about 438 references in Scripture condemning wealth. And, about fifty condemning usury, the practice of lending money at interest. There can also be found laws prohibiting the wearing of clothes made from more than one kind of fibre (polyester blends, anyone?), the eating of pork, and sitting upon a chair whereon has previously sat a woman who has been menstruating.

I say these things not to debunk the Bible. I read it regularly. I am a follower of Jesus, and I am aware that much of the material within the Bible must be understood within the context of the culture and the situation from which it first arose. It is culture-bound.

Thank you. I speak in support of this bill.

Selected Testimony

Much moving testimony was heard at the public hearing of H.247. Though it would be impossible to reprint all of it in its entirety, we selected the two that follow representative of rest.

My name is Elizabeth Morse, and I've lived in Montpelier all my life. I work as a typesetter at the Northfield News and Printery and on weekends I'm an announcer at WSKI-radio in Montpelier.

As a Lesbian, I have not yet faced any direct form of discrimination, although the letters and public statements of people who feel free to call us sick and evil, and say that we have no right to exist, are forms of harassment that affects us all, as meaningless as their word may be to us.

The people that I work for and with at the Northfield News have not had any complaints about my work and have no reservations about having a lesbian work for them. By their support for rights for all people, they encouraged me to speak to you of the absolute normalcy of my job and my life.

The people that I work for at WSKI have not found having a gay deejay any problem. My lifestyle has nothing to do with my ability, my need or willingness to work and to do my job well. My employers know this.

I have been fortunate in having the love and respect and support of family members, friends and co-workers, who have not found their lives adversely affected by the fact that their daughter, sister or friend is gay. It is simply another part of my life.

This is the way it should be. Many of the gay women and men that I know have no such support and a lot to lose by speaking out in support of this bill. By taking action to protect their jobs, livelihoods and families, they could lose them. The risk we face is real. I am here tonight not only to speak out along with and for those of us who have suffered discrimination and harassment, but to speak for my own future. Future employers, future landlords, future business transactions I may be involved in, could depend on this bill being passed. If I don't take this action for my future, I leave it in the hands of those who feel they have a right to discriminate against me and harass me simply because they believe that, because I am gay, I am not protected by the laws of my state.

We are not unusual people. We hold jobs, pay bills, pay taxes, vote, read newspapers and watch TV, perhaps go to school or raise children, and fall in love, like the rest of the population, except we fall in love with people of our own gender. We do not seek to be perverse, hostile, un-American or destructive. We simply seek life and liberty, the same rights that all citizens are entitled to.

Political Lobbying: A Rookie's View

Prior to this session of the legislature, I had almost never come out to anyone whose favorable reaction was anything less than certain, not even my parents. Telling someone I was gay was a calculated risk I preferred to postpone as long as possible. The introduction of H.247 into the House of Representatives this year changed that. In the course of lobbying for this bill, I talked and corresponded with legislators from all over the state, identifying myself as a lesbian and asking them to support the bill.

In the beginning I was so knock-kneed nervous, I wondered whether it was even worth it. I wondered if my discomfort was so obvious that I was making a bad impression and that my efforts would be counter-productive. But in spite of my fears, my experiences were almost always positive, even when the response was negative. The elation I felt after talking with a legislator, regardless of their position, was powerful. The bill's introduction provided me with an incredible opportunity to educate and talk openly with representatives about homosexuality and to be listened to with respect.

Throughout the bill's journey, I remained one of its invisible supporters. I was never in the press, my picture never showed up in any paper. Nowhere but in my imagination did I appear alongside Howdy Russell as he batted aside foolish or hostile questions from reporters. In other words, I was probably a typical supporter of H.247, willing to take only limited risks.

The day H.247 was introduced, I approached my legislator on the House floor before the start of the session and told him I supported the bill. In my haste to end the conversation, I immediately began backing away, bumping into the adjoining seats as he called further questions after me across the rows. It was a dubious launching, at best, for my career as a lobbyist.

But I learned a lot. One of the hardest things I learned was not to be excessively polite, to confront a legislator when they said something untrue or simply ignorant. At first, the mere act of telling them I supported the bill seemed daring and almost "pushy." I accepted with utmost courtesy all their rationalizations for why they couldn't support the bill publicly although they supported it philosophically. I'm not sure when that changed. Maybe when the novelty of talking with representatives wore off.

I began calling representatives who didn't support us at all. They were usually polite and almost always glib - and they made me angry. They used every lame reason available to justify their positions...protections already existed, discrimination wasn't a problem, our rights couldn't infringe on others' rights. One representative from South Burlington

continued, page 9