

Episcopal Diocese Of Vermont Sponsors Conference

by Pat Noll

"The Word Becomes Flesh: Homosexuality and the Christian Journey," a conference sponsored by the Episcopal Diocese of Vermont on March 28th, gathered over 160 people to explore the issues but especially to listen to the sto-

ries of individuals whose lives embody the subject. The Conference guests, from the Diocese of Newark were Rev. John and Marilyn Croneberger, parents of a gay son, Rev. Barry Stopfel, Associate Rector of the church where John is Rector, an Episcopal Priest as an openly gay man and his partner Rev. Will Lechie, a United Church of Christ minister and Hospice Chaplain.

Conference participants met in small groups throughout the day using a technique called "sacred listening" in which each person speaks only for her/himself, sharing from personal experiences and attending prayerfully to what is being spoken. The purpose was not to argue or debate sides of an issue but to share and hear people's life experience and learn from it. Each of approximately 20 small groups had a "resource person" (in addition to a facilitator) who was gay or lesbian or the parent of a gay or lesbian. This design provided everyone with an opportunity to hear first-hand experience as many had never previously done. It also created a safety and openness which invited each participant to share their own questions and concerns. An initial discussion question: "When did you first recognize yourself to be a hetero- or homo-sexual person? Did you choose? Could you have willed to be other?" opened the door to hearing our differences, our similarities and our common experience as human beings for whom sexuality is only one of love's expressions. Several gay and lesbian people felt able to reveal themselves to their groups and in turn experienced others receiving them with understanding and new appreciation of their pain. Others in listening remembered and shared experiences in their pasts of feelings toward people of the same sex or of relatives who are gay or lesbian. Parents discovered other parents, priests heard each

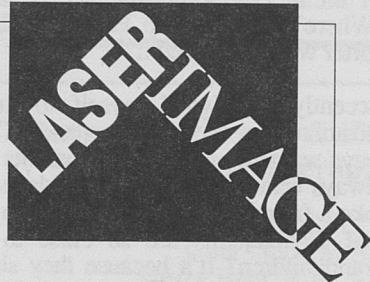
others lives from a new perspective, labels and assumptions of lesbian and gay dissolved as unique individuals revealed themselves, a church community became a welcoming place for people who had left years ago or felt ostracized and excluded.

Hard but necessary questions were asked — Would you bless the relationships of same-sex couples? How can we disagree on aspects of the issue and remain open to hearing and caring for one another? Will we intervene when violence and abuse, even in subtle forms, are taking place around us? Is there space for everyone's story?

Some voices were raised in opposition to the "one-sided" stance of the conference and in an attempt to identify homosexuality as sinful and/or sickness. This perspective was heard but could not overshadow a gathering committed to recognizing and understanding homosexuality as one expression of human relationships.

The small groups were interspersed between presentations by the invited guests. Jack and Mary Croneberger shared their process of discovering they had a gay son when he attempted to commit suicide and their journey from confusion and pain to understanding and support. Barry and Will spoke of their individual paths from traditional rigid religious backgrounds through self-discovery to a place of integration and celebration.

As the conference concluded the title of the day appeared to have come to life in the interactions between participants — not one word but many had become flesh: listening, openness, pain, understanding, grief, difference, respect — and love. ▼



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