

## Faith Matters

by the Reverend Christine Leslie

In late January, my partner, the Reverend Martha Dyson, and I moved to the Burlington area so that Martha could begin serving as the Assistant to the Interim Rector at St. Paul's Episcopal Cathedral in Burlington. We believed then as we do now that this congregation's decision to call Martha is a sign of hope for all of us, because they called her even though they knew from the beginning that she is open and honest about being lesbian and about being partnered to me. Since our arrival the good folk of St. Paul's have welcomed us warmly and supportively. Most seem delighted that we are with them. We know that we are delighted to be in their midst and applaud their courage and leadership in the Burlington community.

I myself am a clergywoman in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). Even though this denomination is on record opposing the ordination of gay and lesbian people, I was ordained openly by the Northern California/Nevada Region of this denomination in 1981. I have stayed in the ministry these sixteen years because of the power of that experience and the vows I took the day I was ordained. As a result of that incredible vote of confidence in me and my consequent ordination, I have served as a hospital and hospice chaplain, parish minister, drug and alcohol counselor, and executive director of the Habitat For Humanity affiliate I helped to found in Newark, NJ in 1986. (I did re-enter the closet to serve as an associate minister of a Congregational church in New Jersey and nearly lost my sanity because of the duplicity with which I lived those three years. It was a very rough way to re-learn an important lesson: no job is worth the hell of hiding when ministry is all about being a person of integrity and honesty.)

The other reason I have been able to stay in the ministry has to do with the fact that I don't believe that practicing a religion (i.e., attending services, observing high holy days, believing its teachings or its version of scriptural interpretations, etc.) and being spiritual (in an active loving relationship with God) are necessarily one and the same. It is wonderful when our spiritual journeys are nurtured and supported by the religion or faith we practice. I know first-hand how wonderful this is and have, indeed, been a member of such congregations over the years.

However, local congregations like this, no

matter what their faith tradition, are not plentiful. This is especially true for those of us who are gay and lesbian, who would like to have a faith community to call home, but don't know where to look to find one that meets our beliefs and preference for worship style while genuinely welcoming and supporting out gay and lesbian people of faith.

Now that I am here in Vermont, I have the opportunity to pursue a goal of mine. For several years now I have wanted to work with gay and lesbian people who wish to integrate their sexual identities and spiritual development journeys by resolving the conflicts they may have between the two. To that end, I've founded Triangle Ministries so I can offer counseling, workshops, and retreats to individuals and groups who want to address this issue.

Because bringing our sexuality into the whole of our lives is a spiritual endeavor, I want others to discover that they, too, don't have to live with the painful, crazy-making split between the sacred and sexual in their lives. I also want out gay and lesbian people of faith to know that there are congregations who want us to come home and who miss us when we aren't there.

Being spiritual alone is possible, and many people do it all the time. However, having kindred spirits to journey with, who love and support us, and with whom we can be ourselves helps to heal the wounds homophobia has inflicted on us. It also makes it possible for us to experience the goodness of our gayness as a God-given gift.

Last but not least, journeying with kindred spirits in such a community of faith can also help us gain the strength and courage to reach out to others who are feeling lost, alone, ashamed, and confused, and to challenge the homophobes who cross our paths. I know I would not be who I am today had I not experienced all of this first-hand myself. Because of this and so much more, I would welcome the opportunity to talk with anyone who might like to discover all of this for him or herself, and look forward to sharing my thoughts and feelings on faith in future columns.

To contact Rev. Christine Leslie, who is in private practice, call her at (802) 860-7106, write to her c/o Triangle Ministries, 14 White Birch Lane, Williston, VT 05495, or e-mail her at REVCSL@aol.com.

## NOW Holds Annual Conference

BRANDON — The Vermont Chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) will hold its annual conference on Saturday, May 17th, at the Otter Valley Union High School. The title of this year's day-long event is "Envisioning a Feminist Future: Turning Ism's into Wasm's." The conference will be co-sponsored by the Vermont Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers and the group Parents, Teachers, and Students for Social Responsibility.

Two plenary speakers are scheduled to address the group. Pat Reuss, the Senior Policy Analyst for the NOW Legal Defense and Education Fund, will speak in the morning on "Tackling the Tough Issues." In the afternoon, Mimi Abramovitz, a Professor at the Hunter School of Social Work and the City University of New York, will address "The Welfare Debate."

Morning and afternoon workshops will focus on such issues as "Lesbian Rights," "Combating Racism and Classism," "The Ongoing Struggle for Reproductive Rights," and "Fight the Right," which will include a screening of the documentary "Onward Christian Soldiers."

Vendors will be available throughout the day with books, buttons, bumper stickers, and other items. Free child care will also be available for those who have pre-registered.

Fees for the conference vary depending on membership and date of registration. Otter Valley Union High School is accessible to people in wheelchairs.

For more information, contact NOW at 362-2005 or write to Jennifer Matthews at RR1, Box 193, Mount Holly VT 05758.

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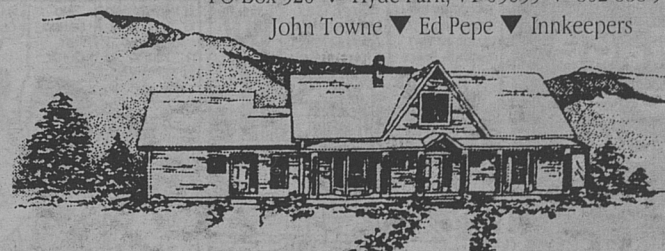


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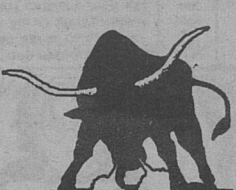
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