

## FAITH



## MATTERS

BY THE REV.  
CHRISTINE LESLIE

In February, I began serving as Interim Protestant Campus Minister at the University of Vermont in Burlington. After encouragement from a number of people, I opted to talk with the Board of the Cooperative Christian Ministry at UVM. After careful and open conversations, I accepted their invitation to take the Campus Minister's job on and am delighted to be using my skills and experience there. I feel well received and supported by the CCM Board and am basking in the warmth and respect students, staff, and faculty are showing. This has been as refreshing as it has been healing.

My calling to serve as the Interim Protestant Campus Minister at UVM has several key aspects that hinge on the dual fact that I am as visible about being an ordained, protestant min-

ister as I am about being a lesbian in a committed relationship. Since I also believe any clergy person who really understands ministry has the ability to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, what I feel called to do at UVM is very clear to me.

First, I feel called to comfort students, staff, and faculty who struggle with their sexual identities because they have been afflicted with negative religious messages about GLBT sexual identities perpetuated from orthodox and conservative faith traditions. Any GLBT person who feels a split between their sexuality and their spirituality deserves to know this does not have to be. It is an evil and dehumanizing split arbitrarily imposed by small-minded people, not The Holy One. I am not just free to offer this comfort; I am encouraged by the CCM Board to do so.

Secondly, I feel called to afflict the comfortable homophobes in our midst with my visible presence. Many people I encounter on campus have never met an ordained minister who is lesbian and open and honest about both at the same time. In some people's minds, I embody two diametrically opposed reali-

ties. At the least, I get homophobes to think about the fact that not all people of faith believe GLBT people are abominations in the sight of God or unfit for ordained ministry. At most, some folks actually have their rigid religious systems crack apart, causing them to look more critically at their beliefs to see if they can really believe them any more.

Thirdly, I feel called to challenge "religionphobia" that I experience in GLBT and straight people alike. I will grant you that many of us have good reason to feel healthy fear toward negative, demeaning, and dehumanizing religious attitudes and beliefs. However, people who are phobic about any kind of organized religion and who dismiss anyone embracing organized religion as "sleeping with the enemy" seem as close-minded and rigid as some homophobic fundamentalists.

This saddens me because there are so many GLBT and straight people in organized religions working to exorcise the demons of homophobia from their traditions. These people just don't yet have the numbers to offset the millions who still function out of prejudicial ignorance and biblical

illiteracy. By being a visibly active minister in the GLBT community at UVM, I hope to help heal the "religionphobia" that keeps many GLBT people from finding creative ways to acknowledge and feed spiritual hunger.

Much of my visibility work as a minister also has to do with easing fears that my goal is to evangelize non-believers. This phobic false assumption permeates almost every new relationship I have. It is especially true when I meet people who no longer practice their childhood religion, who often feel guilty, or people who have never looked into any faith tradition, who often feel ashamed. Given how many people are out to convert others to what they believe to be The Truth, I don't blame people for fearing this. I also don't want their fears to block their access to what healthy religion and spirituality have to offer people.

Being a visible, open-minded campus minister matters because there are people who need to know they have support for building and maintaining their spiritual homes while they work or study at UVM. The style of the home matters not, nor does the location.

I only care that people create and maintain structurally sound spiritual homes to help them weather life's storms, in which they can safely rest and re-create their souls so they can return to the world strengthened for the journey.

Being a visible lesbian campus minister matters because there are GLBT people who deserve to know that they, too, can build a spiritual home that doesn't require that they exile their GLBT selves from the home they build.

And someday, when faith matters as much as visibility matters in the GLBT community, and when visibility matters as much as faith matters in non-homophobic, religious communities, then we might be living in a world where no one is spiritually homeless except by choice. What a glorious thought! ▼

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## MEN'S HEALTH PROJECT

May Events:

### GREEN MOUNTAIN MEN

a weekend retreat in collaboration  
with ACORN/BAP/MHP

This retreat is an opportunity for gay, bi,  
and other men who have sex with men to  
meet each other and spend time enjoying  
our beautiful state!

**WHEN: MAY 7-9**

**WHERE: HULBERT CENTER ON  
LAKE MOREY IN FAIRLEE, VT.**

**FREE FREE FREE FREE FREE**

PLEASE CALL FOR MORE INFO:

MHP: 800-649-2437

ACORN: 800-816-2220

Brattleboro AIDS Project:

802-254-4444 or

careyman@sover.net