

VOICE & VISION

The Newsletter of the Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministry

Vol. 3 No. 2

April 1991

HOMOPHOBIC WITCH HUNT IN THE ELCA

On March 25, 1991, Bill Kunisch, a student at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, had his endorsement for ministry withdrawn because he preached a sermon which made a supportive reference to the ministry of St. Francis Lutheran Church, one of two congregations under a five year suspension from the ELCA for calling Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart, an open lesbian couple, and Jeff Johnson, an openly gay man, as their pastors. The congregations' actions challenged national church policy requiring homosexual candidates for ministry to take a life long vow of celibacy, a vow not required of heterosexual candidates.

In his sermon, Bill suggested that the people of St. Francis were "like any other church people, not a bunch of militant homosexuals trying to overthrow church authorities." He described them as "ordinary people trying to live out their faith," and in so doing, discovered that calling open homosexuals would "shake the rafters of a 5.4 million member church." Bill urged his listeners to "talk about homosexuality, study it, and listen to the stories of gay and lesbian people" as they "prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit." As a result of this sermon, a number of events occurred which led to a special meeting of Bill's candidacy committee at which Bill was asked to state his compliance with the ELCA's *Vision & Expectations* document. The following is a

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Alliance for Action

April 5th-7th, representatives of Lutheran lesbian and gay organizations and networks gathered in S.F. from throughout the U.S. to establish an Alliance for justice ministry in the ELCA. Representatives of Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministry, Lutherans Concerned/NA, the Reconciled in Christ Program, the Professional Leaders Network, and the Seminarian Network gathered to discuss ways to coordinate our respective ministries.

The group developed the following preliminary mission statement: "We are an alliance of ministry organizations and networks committed to confronting homophobia in the Lutheran Church and promoting justice for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, their partners, families and friends. We are also dedicated to empowering all people in their journeys towards spiritual wholeness. Recognizing the interconnectedness of various forms of oppression, we commit ourselves to working in coalition with justice groups addressing issues of

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VOICE & VISION

Voice & Vision: Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministry (LLGM) is a ministry of advocacy, affirmation and spiritual care for lesbians and gay men in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. We seek to assist lesbian and gay people to claim a spiritual voice which is life-affirming and self-authenticating.

Mailing Address

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The Rev. Jeff Johnson
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Special thanks to Mr. Randy Holleschau, and Mr. Fernando Martinez of Red Tag Mail for their assistance with mailing and distribution.

Voice & Vision Team
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Voice & Vision, the newsletter of LLGM, is published every two months. The mailing list for Voice & Vision is composed of individuals who have indicated interest in the ministry, as well as those recommended for inclusion. If you have names to add, or if you wish to be removed from the mailing list, please let the editorial office know. Voice & Vision will be mailed in plain envelopes to anyone requesting it. Letters to the Editor are welcome and encouraged, and will be printed as space permits.

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sexism, heterosexism, misogyny, racism and classism."

The members of the Alliance have agreed to work together on the following issues:

- 1) creating a strong presence at the 1991 ELCA National Church Assembly in Orlando;
- 2) establishing a financial fund for the support of lesbian & gay seminarians;

- 3) sponsoring a National Activists Conference to happen sometime in 1992.

The meeting of this Alliance was made possible through a generous grant from Lutherans Concerned/NA. Anyone interested in the programs of the Alliance, please contact Lynn Mickelson of Lutherans Concerned, 612 451-3529; Leo Treadway of Wingspan, 612 224-3371; or LLGM, 415 553-4026. ▽

Judith Kate Friedman, Singer/songwriter, and Rev. Ruth Frost opening the "Affirmation of Partnership" Ceremony on the steps outside S.F. City Hall.





**Pastor
Ruth
Frost**

Valentine's Day, Feb 14, 1990: We stood at the head of the great marble staircase in city hall, looking down on hundreds of smiling people gazing expectantly up at us. "Announcing, Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart!" To thunderous applause and approving shouts of joy, we descended, arm in arm. We were now officially registered as Domestic Partners, along with 550 other couples, whose descent of the great staircase was similarly heralded.

Just before this dramatic conclusion, we gathered outside city hall with a crowd of other couples and their friends. Together we declared publicly the joy and goodness of our love in an "Affirmation of Partnership" ceremony which LLGM had created for the occasion with the participation of other ecumenical ministries. Cameras and camcorders of friends and press captured one of the most romantic protests San Francisco's lesbian and gay community has ever participated in.

It was both protest and celebration. We who gathered knew that we needed no legitimization from city or state to savor

1991 May-June Calendar

Thurs	Apr 25 - May 30 7:00 - 8:30 p.m.	"Embracing Our Pride" Lesbian Self-esteem Group
Th-Sun	May 2 - 5	Synod Assembly in Fresno
Sun	May 12 1:00 - 3:00 p.m.	"HotDish" Gay Men's Brunch Potluck, Oakland
Sun	May 19 5:00 - 7:00 p.m.	"Creating Our Sacred Space" Lesbian Spirituality Grp
Sat	Jun 1 1:00 - 3:00 p.m.	"Day of Dialogue" on Homosexuality, PLTS
Sun	Jun 9 1:00 - 3:00 p.m.	"Hotdish" Gay Men's Brunch Potluck in S.F.
	Jun 15 - 29	LLGM - Teaching Staff Holden Village
Sun	Jun 16	"Creating Our Sacred Space"
Sun	Jun 30	Lesbian and Gay Freedom Day Parade

the fullness of partnership. What we did in publicly declaring our love was to language the reality we live each day. We know, even if church and state does not, that lesbian and gay people marry each other all the time, and that our commitments to one another are sacred, however others regard them. But going on public record and speaking our promises before all who have ears to hear, was a demonstration of both tenacity and joy. It was a wake-up call to church and state to the fact of our relationships

and the gift of them.

May we all claim the words of acclamation and blessing for that day: "Today you publicly affirm your love for one another, your pride in your community, and your hope for a world born in openness and shared vulnerability. May your shared love give you the vision to love each other - and by faith all others on this earth - not only as you are but as you are yet to be, with a love that is always new." LET IT BE ACCLAIMED! ▽

chronology of the events leading to the withdrawal of Bill's endorsement:

Dec 23, 1990: Bill delivers a sermon at Cross Lutheran Church, his home church in MI; council president questions his support of St. Francis church and asks Bill if he is homosexual. Bill declines to answer the question.

Jan 21, 1991: Bill's pastor informs him that he, the council president and two other members met with Bishop Reginald Holle regarding his sermon. At the meeting, it is agreed that Bill's financial aid be suspended and he be prohibited from preaching or assisting with worship.

Feb 5: Gary Hanson, Asst. to Bishop Holle, summons Bill back to the Synod Office in Lansing for a special meeting about his "self-expressed views on homosexuality," with members of his candidacy committee and a representative from the Division for Ministry.

Mar 9: At the meeting, Bill makes an opening statement and answers questions about his sermon. He is then asked if he "supports and is in compliance with" the *Visions and Expectations* Document, a question that is asked "because your support of St. Francis calls into question whether or not you are in compli-

ance with the document." Bill agrees to answer the question when the committee can demonstrate that it is asked of all seminarians and pastors who have expressed public support of St. Francis.

Mar 25: In a closed meeting of the entire candidacy committee, together with Bishop Holle and Craig Settlage from the ELCA national office, Bill's endorsement as a candidate for ordination is withdrawn.

A SEMINARIAN'S RESPONSE TO HIS ACCUSERS

Ed. note: Excerpted here is Bill Kunisch's opening statement to the members of his candidacy committee:

The question I ask is: "What have I done wrong?" I preached a sermon in which I said that we should respect people whose opinions differ from our own, that we should all study and listen and pray about this as we talk about the issue of homosexuality in the church. I believe my comments were well within the mandates of the church. In an open letter from the Discipline Committee following the 1990 trial and suspension of St. Francis and First United Lutheran Church, the committee states:

I preached a homily in "To achieve a unified understanding within our church will require careful study and open discussion with hearts receptive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To facilitate such open discussion, we must stress to our members that the church is a safe place to share experiences, hopes, and perspectives. We implore all congregations to be safe havens for frank discussion, encourage all to put aside assumptions and listen to competing views without harsh judgment."

In his Pastoral Letter of 1988, Bishop Chilstrom writes: (Homosexual people)

"are the object of incredible abuse and humiliation. Because of this, many of these persons live in quiet desperation, hoping no one will learn of their sexual orientation, and wondering if anyone will ever understand them. It is estimated that 5 to 10 percent of the population is gay or lesbian. This means that we have about 250,000 to 500,000 in the ELCA. Because I have been willing to listen and to learn, I am aware of persons who are gay or lesbian or of persons who have brothers, sisters, sons or daughters who are homosexually oriented persons. I know them as sisters and brothers in Christ."

Has Bishop Chilstrom been summoned in for questioning regarding the contents of this letter? Calling me in for questioning regarding views I mentioned

in a homily is setting a dangerous precedent. Your actions today threaten the freedom of conscience of clergy and seminarians alike. If such inquiries are tolerated, you too may one day be sitting before a committee answering for opinions you shared in a sermon, or a Bible study, or in private conversation.

You may question whether or not I have concerns about the "Visions and Expectations" document of our church. Like the majority of seminarians in our church, I do. And those concerns are also shared by many clergy and parishioners in our church.

For gay and lesbian people, the section in the document about sexual conduct represents an inhumane expectation. Gay and lesbian people are no more unhealthy than heterosexual people. Furthermore, to require celibacy of an individual (regardless of sexual orientation) is unbiblical. It is not a commandment of God, to be imposed by the Church. Our Lutheran confessional heritage (Art. 23 of the Augsburg Confession) clearly repudiates adding such a requirement for ordination. We have a tremendous tradition that teaches justification by grace, but for gay and lesbian people it has become salvation by grace . . . *plus*. The plus being the sacrifice of loving, committed, mutual, co-creative, life-affirming relationships.

What have I said that warrants this hearing/questioning today? If anyone should be asking questions today, it should be me — not my church, not my Bishop and not you. Yet I am here today because I love and care about this church and feel called to be a pastor in it, and that means speaking the truth with love. In the words of James Baldwin, "If I love you, I have to make you conscious of the things you don't see." If I didn't care, I wouldn't be here today because I really shouldn't be here today.

Let's be honest. This meeting is not about a congregation that withdrew its financial support for me. This meeting today is not about a sermon that I preached. This meeting is not about my questions regarding the "Visions and Expectations" document. This meeting is about homophobia.

Lest we become too abstract both in my explanation and your understanding of what I mean, let me share with you how I experienced homophobia last weekend. On Sunday after church, Jeff Johnson and I were walking down Market street in San Francisco when a fight broke out in the parking lot of a grocery store across the street from St. Francis. It was clear that it was a gay bashing. A young man had been thrown on the pavement and into a bunch of grocery carts and a metal post.

He was being kicked in the stomach and blood was spurting from his nose and mouth. As he vigorously continued striking him, the attacker shouted, "You fucking faggot!" You fucking faggot!"

I asked Jeff — and now I'll ask you — "Where is the church in all of this and when will it stop?" The church is both oppressor and victim. It is oppressor when it participates in a conspiracy of silence while thousands of gay men and lesbians are victimized by crimes of hate; made criminals by "sodomy" laws; denied housing, employment, adequate health care, and other human rights every day. Many more are victimized by alienation from family and friends. And let's not forget the abusive ridicule nor the endless supply of gay jokes. How many of us haven't laughed at one?

Yet as the laughter turns into violence and the prejudice into hatred, our church says nothing. Rest assured, the church's actions (or inaction) as well as its silence have spoken volumes. We deny full participation to lesbians and gay men in our churches. We deny ordination and the blessing of committed relationships. We require obedience to discriminatory "guidelines." We put congregations on trial and suspend them.

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But our church is also the victim — the victim of its own fear. It's ironic that at a time when attendance is down and membership in the church is plummeting, this group wants in and we won't let them in. When our church talks about community and its concern for unity, it does so at the expense of part of that community. Perhaps the truth is that gay and lesbian people are *not* a part of that community. Our church is already divided! The Gospel has not been proclaimed. Policies have been dictated by fear, and not the "love which casts out all fear."

As for my question "When will this stop?", I'm afraid that can't be answered until we first answer the question, "Who will stop it?" When I preached my sermon on December 23rd, I decided I will try. How about you?



Ed. note: If you would like to see this decision overturned or express your opinions about it, write:

Rev. Craig Settlage and Bishop Herbert Chilstrom, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 87655 West Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631. For his encouragement, send a copy to Bill in care of LLGM.

For more info call Bill Kunisch at 415-843-2754, or LLGM at 415-553-4026.

VIDEOTAPES AVAILABLE!

Jan 20, 1990 Ordination Video

Commemorates irregular ordinations of Jeff Johnson, Ruth Frost and Phyllis Zillhart. Over 100 Lutheran and ecumenical clergy, together with 1600 laity, participated in this event, both in S.F. and nationwide by means of 7 satellite sites. Order videotape from: *Special Occasion Video*, 577 Dolores St., S.F., 94110 . \$39.

Domestic Partners "Affirmation of Partnership" Celebration Video

Commemorates the passage of domestic partners legislation in a mass ceremony celebrating lesbian and gay partnerships. Event sponsored by LLGM in partnership with LC/SF, Dignity/SF, The Parsonage, and Ministry of Light. Also available from *Special Occasion Video*, \$35.



Rev. Phyllis Zillhart and Rev. Ruth Frost descending City Hall's grand staircase after officially registering as Domestic Partners.

Happy couples exchanging promises and kisses during the "Affirmation of Partnership" Ceremony celebrating the passage of Domestic Partners legislation.



FINANCIAL ALERT!

We will be highlighting areas of needed financial support in each issue of VOICE & VISION, in order to make clearly visible to you where your money goes and how you can continue to participate in our justice-making efforts. Currently, we need contributions for the following:



Scholarship and Support Fund For Lesbian/Gay Seminarians

Financial aid needed to assist openly lesbian and gay seminarians who risk the loss of stipends and other support if they "come out" to their seminaries and congregations.



Donations for Staff Travel Needs

Donations needed for travel expenses to Holden Village to enable LLGM staff to accept an invitation to become part of the teaching faculty for two weeks this June.

Please designate where your check should go (feel free to include both!) and mail to VOICE & VISION:
LLGM 152 Church st., S.F., CA 94114.