

VOICE & VISION

The Newsletter of the Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministry

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Gay Pastor on Trial

On December 15, 1993, Bishop Lyle Miller of the Sierra Pacific Synod brought formal discipline charges against Pastor Ross D. Merkel who serves St. Paul Lutheran Church, Oakland, CA. As a gay man in a committed relationship, Merkel has been charged with "conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office." A public trial will begin February 18, 1994. Lucy Kolin, Co-pastor of Resurrection Lutheran Church, will represent Merkel at the discipline hearing. Kolin was presiding minister during the "irregular" ordinations of Pastors Ruth Frost, Phyllis Zillhart and Jeff Johnson in 1990. Kathy Kelly, Co-chair of the discipline committee which heard the case of St. Francis and First United Lutheran Churches, is Kolin's legal advisor.

In a service celebrating 15 years as an ordained minister, Merkel came out to his congregation and introduced his partner of over six years to

them. Merkel has served the congregation of St. Paul over a decade, and as one parishioner said, "This was an 'open secret' to most of us- we can all just talk about it now. Ross has been a fine pastor to us all these years. This doesn't change anything." Since Merkel's announcement, only one member has left the church; 19 have joined.

The Church Council responded to Pr. Merkel's announcement by voting unanimously to affirm Pr. Merkel's ministry, citing the congregation's 1984 Mission Statement which says that "a part of our ministry is speaking out on behalf of those who are powerless, oppressed and discriminated against. We believe that such advocacy is consistent with the clear witness of the scriptures. As Jesus Christ intercedes on our behalf, so we are called upon to intercede

Guest Pastor's Column

*The Rev.
Ross D.
Merkel*

On June 6, 1993, I formally shared with my congregation that I am a gay person in a committed relationship with another man. I say "formally" because the majority of the congregation already knew this. So why be public? Because such sharing was necessary for me and for the congregation at that time in our life together. I realized that I was becoming increasingly angry at having to hide an important part of who I am, and that that anger was put out there in a shotgun manner - hitting anyone who happened to be in its path. I had also reached a place in my own life where I knew that I could no longer be silent about this part in my life. Such silence felt like a denial of something which has helped to shape and form both my personal life and my ministry as an ordained person; something to be honored and affirmed. I realized that if I was to continue as a member of the Christian community, let alone as an ordained minister, that something would have to change. I believe that God also knew that, for I believe that it was God who led me to publicly share another part of who I am with my faith community. I

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Voice & Vision: Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministry (LLGM) is a ministry of advocacy, affirmation and spiritual care for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people 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.

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Voice & Vision, the newsletter of LLGM, is published quarterly. 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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believe that it was a kairos moment - a moment which God had been working to prepare for most of my life. That it occurred on June 6 was significant in that that day marked the 15th anniversary of my ordination.

Being gay is not the sum total of who I am, but it is an important part and has had a significant bearing in my own development. God has taught me a great deal about grace and community and faith in my journey to date, and I expect God still has much to share in the months and years ahead. Since sharing this information with members of my faith community here at Saint Paul, I have felt much of the anger that I had disappear. I'm not angry and I'm not afraid. I feel as if my life is more complete and that I have fewer barriers to maintain, because now there is no great secret to protect. All of that energy is freed up for more productive things.

I know that there will be many who will not understand this. I know that many will hate me even without knowing me, simply because I am gay. I cannot change that. I can only trust my relationship with God, and that relationship affirms who I am as a child of God who is gay. Whatever happens as a result of the institutional response of the ELCA, I know that the future will be OK. I also know that there are many people in our Church who offer their support to me and to other gay and lesbian clergy. Such support is a gift which we value, as is your presence with us

in our journeys.

Historical Society Archives V&V

The Gay and Lesbian Historical Society of Northern California invited Voice & Vision to archive its newsletters in their collection. Their archives are composed of several departments: Periodicals, Oral Histories, Manuscripts, Organizational Histories, and Ephemera.

The collection will be deposited with the Gay and Lesbian Center in the I. M. Pei designed public library now under construction in San Francisco's Civic Center. In that setting, these materials will be available to scholars, ordinary patrons and on-line to the entire world. Currently, the Society has nearly 2,000 titles of periodicals representing an array of social, religious, political, and artistic values found in the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans-gender people.

Ruth Frost, Editor of the *Voice & Vision* newsletter commented, "We are pleased and honored to know that our newsletter resides in the same collection with the personal papers of people like Roberta Achtenberg and will be accessible to readers world-wide and into the future. It helps to set our struggle for justice within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America in a broader perspective."



**Pastor
Jeff
Johnson**

1994 marks the fourth anniversary of our ordinations. Ruth, Phyllis and I were ordained in a spectacular ceremony on January 20, 1990 at St. Paulus Lutheran Church in San Francisco. Just two months before our ordinations, San Francisco was shaken by the great Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989 as Ruth and Phyllis were preparing to interview for the call committee. Loma Prieta was an apt context for the roots of this ministry. Our ordinations were one of many shock waves which will eventually tumble the outdated structures of heterosexism and discrimination within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and the rest of society. Whereas there have been significant tremors in the past, some would say that the ordinations were an 8.5 on the Richter scale, sounding a wake up call to the church: either shore up and reinforce this old structure, or tear it down. Of course, we hope that the foundations of homophobia go the way of so many out dated freeways and other dangerous structures.

This cataclysm has not been without significant casualties. I think of all the men and women who have given up on God because of the abuse they have experienced in the church. I think of all the men with HIV who have died over the past 5

years who have not known the unconditional love of God nor the compassion and care of pastors or healthy religious communities. I think of those lesbian, gay and bisexual pastors, whose calls and ministries have become victims of the church's policy of enforced celibacy and who have been crushed in mind and spirit by the system crashing in upon them.

With the suffering of the 1989 quake in San Francisco and the Northridge quake in Los Angeles last month, come also stories of heroism, courage and inspired activism. The presence of LLGM has inspired many caught in the rubble of oppression to find their way out. Through LLGM, we have helped many to shelter themselves against future instances of gay bashing by religious people. Together we have made it more difficult for discrimination and homophobia to be rebuilt in the places where they formerly securely stood.

As I was remembering our ordinations, I also thought about my initial partners in this journey: Jim Lancaster and Joel Workin, the two other seminarians with whom I came out now almost 5 years ago — a coming out which radically changed the nature of the discussion about lesbian and gay issues within the ELCA. Both now live in Los Angeles, so I called them to see how they had made it through the earthquake. Jim lost some antique glass, a concrete wall and had a ruptured water pipe. Joel's house saw a few cracks, but little other damage.

Without these two men, LLGM would probably never have happened. However, neither of them is ordained. Only Joel continues to be active in a church. If only the quake which they helped to start back in seminary had been as kind to them as this most recent one they survived in L.A.

Thanks, Jim and Joel, for making our ordinations possible! Congratulations, Ruth and Phyllis, on our four year anniversary! Blessings, Ross Merkel, as you round this new bend in your journey of faith! Our gratitude to the many other persons of courage who have lost lives and careers, or gained hopes and dreams, courage and activism in the midst of the mighty trembler which is presently rocking the oppressive structures of our church and society.



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joy, not just their very real fear. Perhaps this meeting helped to open their ears. Perhaps not.

NOTE: The ELCA is tabulating all responses to the Sexuality Statement. We invite you to send your response to: Bishop Herbert Chilstrom, Sexuality Study, The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631.



The Stone and the Story

Pastor Lucy Kolin

Editor's Note: Pastor Kolin was the preacher at the Service of Celebration and Support, sponsored by *The Network* on behalf of Pastor Ross Merkel and St. Paul Lutheran Church. Her sermon, *The Stone And The Story*, is based on Mark 16:1-8, the Gospel for the day. An edited version is printed here.

Don't let the stone get in the way of the story. But it isn't so easy. The upcoming trial and the ever-tightening spiral of ecclesiastical control all too clearly suggest that the stone - and not the story - is getting all the press.

The very large stone was the topic of conversation for the women who went to the tomb early in the morning. There was no talk about the crucifixion, about dashed hopes or broken promises - the only conversation possible was about the stone, which filled their days and dreams. That "very large" stone, symbol of death and impossibility, so consumed them that when they finally arrived and found the stone already rolled away, there was no joy, only terror and amazement.

Don't let the stone get in the way of the story. That's the message for us this afternoon as we gather in the name of the One

who is our story, rejoicing in the ministry of St. Paul Lutheran Church and their pastor, preparing to keep vigil, and seeking strength for faithful testimony and faithful lives. We too are tempted to focus on the stone and forget the story. We too are tempted to see only those very large stones which seem to block the pathway of the Gospel, sealing the fate of this pastor and this congregation, sealing us all inside the tomb of hopelessness and isolation, making our presence here today a mere paying of respects to an impotent hope. It would be a mistake not to acknowledge the stones that loom large on the horizon of the Church, for God never calls us to abandon reality.

We need to name those stones and then the power that pre-empts them: The stone of legalism, that atmosphere of unholy power, whose only story is the way things are and the way things have to be, conveyed in rules and percentages. The stone of disciplinary proceeding, the trial, which has the power to simply reinforce the status quo and to render a verdict devised and delivered not in the spirit of the stone rolled away but of a stone deemed too risky to remove. The stone of our legitimate fears, fear about what may be lost or forgotten, about choices

erased and ministry frozen. The stone of our own wrath which goes beyond righteous anger, paralyzing the movement of grace by the desire for revenge. The very real weight of such very real stones can leave us speechless and stunned, unable to breathe a word of the story, unable to sing of the stone rolled away and the Spirit of Jesus alive in the land.

Today God calls us to look up, like the women on that first Easter morning, and see that even these very large stones are subject to the God of Life. God calls us to believe that the story of life rolls on and on, guaranteed by Jesus' suffering, death and rising, unbound by any verdict, undefeated by any death.

Today we celebrate the story of the courage and integrity of a pastor, the story of a congregation whose love was the womb in which their pastor's courage grew until his story could be born into speech. It is the story of gay, lesbian and bisexual people, their vocations stifled by the Church, yet their voices unstoppable in calling the Church to repentance and truth. It is the story of the people of God in many places, across many denominations, who continue to live as the beloved community, welcoming and just.

Best of all, it is the story which inspires our own: the story of the Crucified One raised to life who calls us beyond the tomb, beyond the stone, beyond the trial, beyond the verdict, beyond failure, disappointment or fear. Oh, we shall not escape the trial and we shall always be given

reason to fear and to fail. But today Jesus calls us back to Galilee, back to the place where we first met and knew him, back to the promises, back to the risk and the joy of community.

The message of the messenger, which now must be our own, is that all of us - those who most visibly risk their lives and reputations, but also those most anxious to reveal the tomb and replace the stone - are called to that never-ending destiny of community and life. The messenger points us beyond the obvious and the necessary, the accepted risks and the undesired challenges, and tells us that although divisions and death may seem our only future, Jesus the Christ has won the right to reconcile us all and to restore and renew our future. It is a future meant for all, for the failures and the traitors, for the believers and the doubters, for the fearful and the fools.

In the Eucharist today God once more rolls away every stone which might keep us from life and says the words we feared never to hear again: "The verdict that counts is already in: You are my Beloved. You are free to live and hope and love one another." With such a word, we may go in peace; with such a word we may dare to speak; with such a word, we may be strength for each other. God is not bound. Christ is arisen, and the story will go on - whether in spite of the Church or through the witness of the Church. For the spirit of the stone has been defeated but the Spirit of the story lives on. How can we keep from singing?"

VOP Career Program Launched

Voices of Pride Resource Center for Sexual Minority Youth has launched a new Career Partnership program. This program partners young people with lesbian, gay and bisexual business and professional leaders in a career partnership program which can make a difference in the lives of young people and assist them in claiming a positive future.

Through this program, business and professional leaders have an opportunity to participate in the program in a variety of ways: as consultants for young people wishing to explore a particular career path, as trainers for those seeking to develop job skills, as employers, and as healthy role models. Voices of Pride is working in conjunction with members of the Golden Gate Business Association and the East Bay Professional and Business Alliance. An open house for business and professional leaders in December resulted in over a dozen participants, from lawyers to small business owners to physicians and landscape architects, among others.

This May, VOP is sponsoring a "Personal Growth & Career Planning" Job Fair at the Voices of Pride site in Oakland. Young people will be able to attend workshops on a variety of topics, hear presentations from gay, lesbian and bisexual representatives of several different fields

and do on site informational interviewing. For more information on this event call: 510/530-8529. ▽

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Overheard at the Service of Support for Ross Merkel:

"If Christianity disappeared from the face of the earth, eventually even the Church would be affected."

on behalf of others in the social, political and religious arenas of our society." The clergy and laity of the East Bay Conference expressed their continuing confidence in Pr. Merkel by electing him Conference Dean.

On February 6, 1994, The Network to End Sexual Discrimination in the ELCA sponsored a Service of Support & Celebration on behalf of St. Paul Lutheran Church and Merkel. Approximately 400 Lutherans from around the Bay Area gathered for this service and pledged to continue their support by participating in an ongoing prayer vigil throughout the trial.

The congregation has requested that letters of support and statements of solidarity be sent to their congregation (1658 Excelsior Ave., Oakland, CA 94602), the Sierra Pacific Synod office (401 Roland Way, #215, Oakland, CA 94621) and the Chicago office of the ELCA (8765 W. Higgins Rd., Chicago, IL 60631).

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