

# VOICE & VISION

The Newsletter of the Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministry

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## A CLOUD OF WITNESSES FOR LESBIAN PASTOR

The Rev. Jane Adams Spahr, an open lesbian in a committed partnership, has been called as co-pastor of the Downtown Presbyterian Church in Rochester, N. Y. The 800 member congregation said that they voted overwhelmingly to call Spahr because of their conviction that she was "head and shoulders the best qualified, most skilled, most wonderful candidate for the job."

The Genesee Valley Presbytery voted in early January, by a vote of 105 to 66, to approve the congregation's call to Spahr. The call was immediately challenged by a small group of churches within the presbytery who are appealing the majority decision. A hearing has been set May 19th when the Synod Permanent Judicial Commission will hear the case. The case is expected to eventually reach the denomination's highest judicatory, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission.

The Rev. Spahr was ordained in 1974 and has served since 1982 as Director of Spectrum (formerly Ministry of Light), a ministry on behalf of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Marin County, CA. In her work with Spectrum, Spahr provided pastoral care to people infected with AIDS and assisted many in their dying process. When she was told of the congregation's decision and knew it would result in a political battle within the denomination, Spahr said, "I called on my [departed] friends from the other side, what I call my 'cloud of witnesses.' I know these folks are working for me." She also said she had received hundreds of letters of support from individuals and churches around the

## ELCA CHURCH LEADERS UNITE TO END SEXUAL DISCRIMINATION

By Rev. Kelly Denton-Borhaug, Chair  
*The Network to End Sexual Discrimination in the ELCA*

Just a few weeks after the Network was officially formed and I accepted the position of interim chair, a seminarian sought me out. "I need your advice. I really don't know what to do. No one knows I'm gay at the seminary. If I come out, I'm pretty sure that I'll never get ordained in this church. If I stay in the closet, I'll get ordained, but at what cost? Tell me, what should I do?"

Such is the position of gay and lesbian people who think about ordained ministry in the ELCA these days. As if all the other pressures of seminary aren't enough, now it seems we're requiring people to choose between following their calling and the faithful living out of their full identity and personhood. They can't have both.

I am angry that there is so little advice I can give the seminarian who confided in me. He was right; coming out of the closet, no matter what gifts of faith and ability one brings for ministry, will undoubtedly

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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.

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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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Pastor  
Jeff  
Johnson

"Let's kill these fag-lovers!" read the hand-scribbled note which one Lutheran youth wrote and passed to two others and their youth pastor during a discussion of homosexuality at our synod assembly. They were supported by their youth pastor, who read the note, chuckled and passed it on! Later, in conversation with others about the incident, someone remarked, "I don't think the note said 'kill', it only said 'get rid of.'"

Hate requires the specificity of language for expression. To write "Let's kill (or get rid of) these fag-lovers," and then to laugh about or minimize the incident, is the beginning of the web of violence which increasingly injures members of my community. Abusive speech leads to, supports and increases physical violence against lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Most church leaders recognize and decry the language of racism. Had the note read, "Let's kill (or get rid of) these nigger-lovers," swift accountability of the youths and their pastor would be expected with possible disciplinary action taken. However, many people fail to make the connections when the language of hate is directed at *fags* and *dykes*.

Why is it that more

controversy ensues when a gay couple wishes to celebrate their love for one another with a religious ceremony, than when words which frighten and abuse are bandied about with callous humor?

Why is it that the ELCA will pursue, to the point of expulsion, two small congregations supportive of lesbian, gay and bisexual people but choose to ignore this type of verbal violence, downplaying its significance? Who will protect children and all those vulnerable to the barrage of hate which confronts us? When will they experience the offense? When will they cry out against the violence of sexism and heterosexism?

Until they do, we must. And we shall!



## BISHOP KRISTER STENDAHL TO SPEAK IN BAY AREA

Bishop Krister Stendahl, Bishop Emeritus of Stockholm, and former Professor at Harvard University, will give two lectures on *The Bible and Lesbian and Gay People*. One lecture will take place on Sunday, May 31, at First Lutheran Church, 600 Homer Avenue, in Palo Alto. The second will take place on Monday, June 1, at St. Paulus Lutheran Church, Eddy and Gough Streets, in San Francisco. Both talks will begin at 7 p.m. Call (415) 322-4669 (Palo Alto) or (415) 673-8088 (S.F.) for more information.



**Pastor  
Ruth  
Frost**

The evening curfews have been lifted. San Francisco is quiet. Flames die down to ashes in L.A. Under the watchful eyes of the national guard and the marines, citizens begin forming volunteer clean-up crews while the nation ponders how to handle the larger clean-up problem of racism and poverty.

Like so many other whites, I was stunned by the Rodney King verdict. I wasn't informed enough not to be. Though a *member of a sexual minority*, my white skin has protected me from police brutality so far. Tonight I will leave my office and step over Blaine, the homeless alcoholic who regularly sleeps stretched out in the alley next to church, and I will walk around the mentally ill woman who mutters to herself constantly as she sits huddled on the church steps. I will avoid the young, black men hanging out on the corner passing their unemployment with booze and drugs. And I will pick up my paycheck on the way out, with the fervent prayer, "Thank you, O God, that I am not like these!"

The rights, well-being and safety of sexual minorities will always be of vital interest to me, for indeed, they concern my very survival. I can't "take a break" from heterosexism for I am its victim. Being lesbian is not what

I do but who I am. I can, however, "take a break" from dealing with racism, especially my own. My white skin allows me as many breaks as I like. My faith, (and my training as a politically correct liberal) is the only thing which says "break time is over. Get back to work. You're still accountable to the job of resisting *all* the "isms" which oppress and diminish human life.

This week it isn't my faith which calls me back to accountability. It's the incendiary anger of my African-American sisters and brothers. This week has been a potent reminder to me of what happens when hope is lost and justice deferred. My *training as a therapist* tells me that depression and rage are the *learned belief* in one's own helplessness. Racism is a powerful teacher and it is bone deep in our society. Those of us who are white are spoon-fed it from birth. If we're white, we're "normal." If we're male, we're "normal." If we're straight we're "normal." We're part of that mainstream culture which norms all reality for the rest of humanity. That's what makes us so dangerous. Unless we happen to have a characteristic which is not mainstream, we don't have the vantage point to see the cruel injustice of our norms. What does it take for those of us privileged by skin color or gender or orientation to hear the cries of those who do not share our power, our perspectives, our resources or our justice?

"Saul, Saul, why do you

persecute me?" cried the Voice on the way to Damascus. The Biblical witness makes it clear that Jesus so identifies with the persecuted and the oppressed that they and he are indistinguishable. We must learn to see ourselves as impoverished to exactly the same degree that we refuse to share our privilege. We must see ourselves as alienated from the body of Christ to the same extent that we are alienated from our neighbor's body. We must be struck blind before we can open our hearts and hear the Voice which bids us see.



#### Witnesses from front page

country.

When she first "came out" as a lesbian over a decade ago, Spahr lost her position with the congregation in which she was serving at the time. She says this call to the Downtown congregation has helped to heal the wounds of past rejection from her denomination. The Downtown congregation, said Spahr, "had to deal with their homophobia in voting to extend me the call and I had to deal with my churchphobia in accepting it. I am deeply grateful for the invitation to serve there. They are beautiful people. This process is opening many people to new and further dialogue and discovery."



# DISCOVERING GAY MALE SPIRIT



By: Steve Ridlon, Board Member,  
VOICE & VISION: LLGM

Late April, a season of regeneration and renewal, found twenty of us trekking the wilds of Camp Cazadero for Voice & Vision's first gay men's retreat. As a new board member who comes from outside the Lutheran community, the retreat was my first chance to meet many of the people whose lives have been affected and inspired by this ministry. I realized that the ministry's immediate impact already reaches beyond the Greater Bay Area as guests from outlying areas joined those from the Bay Area.

What we found was a special opportunity to discover our diversity and the spiritual tap roots that help ground us. For many, those roots have survived cruel cuts from repressive religious institutions. And in recent times, the AIDS epidemic has seriously shaken, but ultimately strengthened, our spirituality. While all of us were dealing with grief in various stages and degrees, the retreat was also a time to affirm hope and celebrate the courage to persevere. There was needed healing with respect to being an often despised minority. We are discovering nurturing love and support within our own

community when families of origin lack the capacity to understand and appreciate our special gifts as gay men.

The weekend was also a time of much laughter and kidding which revealed what affection there is for Pastor Jeff Johnson, and among those who have embarked on the spiritual quest Jeff is guiding. Honest sharing in both small groups and as a whole helped us in bonding, and there were rituals for expressing our spirituality and releasing pains and resentments. Together we celebrated our intimacy and embraced our sexuality, while learning that we don't need to be sexual to express our love and caring for one another.

A roaring bonfire in a pitch black night was certainly the most dramatic of the settings, but walks and hikes also made us mindful of the beauty and power of nature. Games, sports and plenty of quiet time made it a relaxing mini-vacation from jobs and stresses of city life. Like many other activities of Voice & Vision's, the Spring Men's Retreat was an optimistic beginning- another step forward in strengthening the spiritual bonds between gay men.



Leaders Unite from front page

seriously jeopardizè his ordination.

Those of us who are finding ourselves similarly frustrated about this are uniting to invite leaders throughout our church to join us in challenging the ELCA to stop the present practises of sexual discrimination against gay and lesbian people. We are calling on those with institutional power and privilege, (particularly straight church leaders: AIMS, clergy and lay), to come out of the closet in support of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters. Specifically, we are asking church leaders to authorize the use of their names to be included on a public roster that challenges the ELCA to the following:

- to affirm committed and faithful same-sex relationships with appropriate ecclesial liturgies, and provide pastoral care for homosexuals as for all other members of the ELCA;
- to accept qualified women and men- regardless of sexual orientation, single or partnered- as pastors and professionals of this church and as candidates for ministry within it;
- to seek justice for victims of sexual discrimination within the church and to support those who provide care for these victims and advocate on their behalf;
- to promote an environment open to honest and faithful discussion as together we seek greater clarity under God concerning issues surrounding sexuality.

Too many church leaders who already hold positions of power are reluctant to openly face these issues. Pastors feel it might damage their careers and inhibit opportunities for call. Seminary professors wonder if they'll be branded "gay activist" in the theological community. Church leaders don't want to push the issue because it elicits such strong emotions in people. While we wait, our silence implies consent as gay and lesbian candidates for ordained ministry are weeded out of the process. While we wait, gays and lesbians leave the church which is battering them, in search of communities that can provide nurture and acceptance.

Church leaders who have added their names to *The Network* roster don't want to wait anymore. The Body of Christ is wounded and alienated from itself through the sexual discrimination now practised against gay and lesbian Lutherans. We want to be able to "advise" potential candidates for ordained ministry to joyfully and faithfully embrace both their full identity and their calling to ministry. We invite all church leaders of the ELCA- AIMS, clergy and lay- to join us.



*If you would like more information call: The Rev. Kelly Denton-Borhaug, 415 647-5050.*



## ASSEMBLED... ...BUT NOT TOGETHER

"God's Children At Risk" provided a gut-wrenching theme for the Sierra Pacific Synod Assembly in Oakland, April 30-May 3, the most violent weekend in the United States since the Civil War. We Lutherans could talk about race relations in America. Delegates could even pass a resolution decrying racism and calling for a compassionate response.

Yet, when a subsequent resolution requested concrete action from the assembly in the form of a one time donation of five dollars per delegate and one dollar per congregational member for multi-cultural ministries, it was defeated, despite awareness of drastic cut-backs to these ministries in recent years. It seems we condemn arsons and looters in L.A. while burning bridges to community good will and stealing the gospel's witness to justice.

Lesbians and gay men also received a double message. In February, the Synod Council issued a statement encouraging pastors "to deliberate prayerfully and use wise discretion in decisions regarding the pastoral blessing of monogamous, covenantal, same-sex relationships." While cautious, the statement cracked open the door to lesbian and gay relationships. Knowing that conservatives were planning a

substitute resolution requiring only a majority vote, lesbian and gay supporters withdrew a resolution seeking acceptance of qualified lesbian and gay candidates for ministry, single or partnered and ecclesial liturgies for same-sex relationships. Conservatives

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offered a resolution from the floor, calling for revocation of the Council's statement on pastoral discretion. As an independent motion, this resolution needed a two-thirds vote. It was barely defeated.

Wise politics prevented regressive movement and kept the door cracked open. But the "victory" rang hollow for those impatient for justice and hungry for "good news." The mother of a gay son interested in ministry asked tearfully, "What am I supposed to tell my son?"



## VOICE & VISION BOARD NEWS

The staff wishes to acknowledge and welcome new officers and new board members to the ministry of VOICE & VISION: LLGM. New members joining the board are: Mr. Steve Ridlon, Vice-President of Marketing for Home Federal of S.F., Dr. Melissa Wyer, Psychotherapist, and Mr. Wayne Strei, St. Francis liaison to the board. Steve is participating in the development of our support project for sexual minority youth in Oakland. Melissa is involved in our lesbian program development, and Wayne is helping us plan a fall fundraiser. We are excited to have such talented and committed new members to our board!

We also wish to acknowledge

experienced board members for their willingness to assume new responsibilities as board officers: The Rev. Janet Beatty, President, Mr. Dale Johnson, Vice-President, The Rev. James De Lange, Treasurer, and Mr. Kreg Eacret, Secretary. We are grateful for their continued guidance and participation in this ministry.

The staff also wishes to express our appreciation to two board consultants who have been working with us in the area of organizational and board development. Thanks to a generous donation from Mr. Rick Brown, we received the capable and caring services of his colleague Ms. Marie Jones-Smith. Together, they

have guided us as this ministry moves from its organizational infancy into its mature stages.

Our thanks would not be complete without recognizing the skilled efforts of our fundraising consultant, Ms. Sherrie Holmes, who has helped stabilize a difficult financial situation, and Mr. Jim Runyeon, who has donated his services in the area of financial planning.

To all these wonderfully skilled and visionary people,  
*Thanks!*



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