

# VOICE & VISION

The Newsletter of the Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministry

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## A Pro-Active Response to the "Religious Right"

By Pastor Jeff Johnson

For the past twelve months, I have been active in a coalition of progressive religious leaders who consider it imperative to respond to the emerging political strength of the "Religious Right." For many lesbian, gay and bisexual people, *Christian* is synonymous with the antics of the "Religious Right." Many dare not enter a Christian community or speak with a Christian pastor for fear of encountering the contempt and hatred they experience daily from the "Right." Because of the "Right," the Gospel's message of justice and affirmation, promise and new life, is lost on those who most need to hear this life-renewing assurance.

For these reasons, *United in Spirit* was born. Last fall during a visit of the "Right" to San Francisco in the form of the Rev. Lou Sheldon's Traditional Values Coalition (TVC), a group of us from lesbian, gay and bisexual affirming churches and ministries gathered for prayer across the street from the church where Sheldon's TVC was organizing. Because of that prayer gathering, *United in Spirit*

was formed as an interfaith coalition of religious leaders "committed to voice an inclusive vision in a fragmented world and to creating a just society in which all members participate equally, including women, people of color, people with HIV, lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transgender as well as heterosexual people."

In its brief existence *United in Spirit* has become a visible response to the vocalized hatred of the "Right"! We have organized *Rapid Response FAX and Phone Tree*; met monthly to plan strategies and discuss appropriate responses to the "Right;" convened a theological task force; and have provided interviews and comments to the media from progressive religious leaders throughout the Bay Area. We have begun

## Post-Trial Report on Merkel and Congregation

As a gay man in a committed relationship, Pastor Ross D. Merkel was charged by the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and found guilty of "conduct incompatible with the character of the ministerial office." March 25, 1994, Pastor Merkel was removed from ordained ministry of the ELCA. The Rev. Lyle Miller, former synodical Bishop who brought charges against Pastor Merkel, issued a statement in which he called the decision "...very painful for everyone. Pastor Merkel is a good pastor, and the congregation in general has a high regard for his ministry. However, all pastors of the ELCA are expected to live according to the church's guidelines."

On the eve of his removal from ordained ELCA ministry, The Network to End Sexual Discrimination in the ELCA sponsored a "Service of Protest, Support and Affirmation" for Pastor Merkel and the people of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Oakland. About 350 people attended the service which was held on the campus of Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary. During the service fifty Lutheran clergy participated in the ancient ritual of "laying on of hands," a rite of blessing conferred to candidates being ordained. By this action, they "reinstated" Pastor Merkel into his call to St. Paul Lutheran Church where he has served for the past decade. Pastors Ruth Frost and

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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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## "Tales of the City" and You

Pastor Ruth Frost

I was watching Armistead Maupin's "Tales of the City" on public television the other night when I thought of you, our newsletter readers. You're probably thinking right now, "Does she really believe I come home, grab the joint my landlady leaves taped to my door, kick back and read this newsletter with Mona, Michael and the gang?" Actually, I don't. While it would be nice to know that you all have places and people which are as interesting and dear to you as the characters that reside at 23 Barbary Lane, I hope that you are all "clean and sober," as they say in AA.

So why did I think of you? It's because every half hour or so PBS would interrupt "Tales" to talk about pledging to public television. One of the pledge pitches particularly got to me. It went something like this: "Many of you out there are regular viewers of public television and swear by the quality of our programs. We're glad that you tune in to us and appreciate our programs. But remember, there's no such thing as free public TV. Other viewers are making the contributions needed to keep us on the air. So if you are a regular viewer of public TV, won't you please stop eavesdropping and join the conversation by becoming a contributor?"

The truth is, Dear Readers, that while we don't charge a subscription rate, those pledge pitches are right. There is no such thing as a free newsletter. In fact, this one costs us approximately \$6,000 a year by the time it reaches your mailbox. Some of you have been getting it for four years without ever having made a contribution to

Voice & Vision: Lutheran Lesbian and Gay Ministry. Now you're probably thinking, "Hmmpfh! Does she think I'll give in that easily to guilt tactics?" Well, I'm counting on your Lutheran roots to give us a boost. Guilt is sometimes salutary. And if you've recovered from all your guilt and shame, so much the better. There's always the giving spirit of grace.

Seriously, we're glad you're reading about us. We invite your written responses to help us continue the high standards we've set for ourselves. We want our readership to help shape what you need from this newsletter. Perhaps you need more information about what other ministries are doing on behalf of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Perhaps you simply need to know you're not alone in the world. Whatever you need, we want to know.

But we also need your financial support. Help us meet our newsletter costs with a \$25 contribution today.

By the way, this PBS viewer stopped eavesdropping and joined the public TV conversation.

*Voice and Vision* continues to need your support to meet our daily operational needs and program goals. Please consider a contribution. On the back page of this issue you'll find a return section for this purpose.



**Pastor  
Ruth  
Frost**

One of the highlights of my ministry this month has been working with a lesbian couple in a counseling process for their upcoming holy union. Working with lesbian and gay couples is not particularly unusual for this pastoral staff but what makes this situation different is that I'm doing this counseling process with a straight clergy ally as my co-counselor. This is because the couple first approached him about their union plans, asking if he would marry them. As one can imagine, this became an opportunity for him to think about what risks he was prepared to take on behalf of our community and the gospel.

*Being a man of both* conscience and courage, he came to the decision that he would marry them. Furthermore, he decided that he would need some training in how to work effectively with some of the issues particular to same gender couples. So he suggested to them that the four of us meet together in counseling sessions prior to their union ceremony. He wanted to further his sensitivity and awareness by working with me without making the couple shoulder the responsibility for his education at a time when they needed to be free to focus on their own needs and plans.

I have been deeply touched by this humility in my straight clergy colleague. I have also thoroughly enjoyed our teamwork in couples' counseling as has the lesbian couple who didn't expect to get two counselors for the price of one. The four of us have built bridges

of understanding and respect to one another, and have had an opportunity to experience the gifts that come when people truly want the best for each other.

Thanks to my clergy colleague's request, Voice & Vision will offer a series of trainings for straight clergy who are currently working with, or wish to work with same gender couples seeking holy unions. Our first training will be June 21, 1994. Thank-you, Pastor Dale, for inspiring a new focus for our ministry, and reminding us, when we are discouraged, that we who are toiling in marginalized ministries have many fine allies such as you.

## St. Paul's Responds to Supporters

*Discouraged by the legalistic tact of church officials and encouraged by the concern of the wider Body of Christ's presence, St. Paul Lutheran Church of Oakland, CA shared this letter with its supporters.*

To our brothers and sisters in Christ:

With our sincerest and most heartfelt gratitude, we ask God's blessings on you for your letters, prayers and declarations of support and solidarity during this difficult time. We have received letters of support from people all over the country—from loud voices and from quiet voices, from people who have been hurt by the Church and from people who have been blessed by it, from people within the ELCA and from people in other denominations, from congregations, from ministries officially sanctioned member of

and from individuals. Your letters and prayers have strengthened us and helped us with our true mission, which is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ within our community and within the ELCA.

Effective March 25, 1994, an the ELCA clergy roster, but he continues to serve the gospel in our midst. As of today (April 20), we have received no official word from the Sierra Pacific Synod or the ELCA regarding our status. The congregation of St. Paul still functions as an ELCA congregation and wishes to remain (in the ELCA).

Many people told us they were saddened to hear of the discipline charges, the subsequent trial, and Pastor Merkel's removal, but we believe this can be a great teaching moment for the church. Already the Sierra Pacific Synod in Assembly passed a resolution pledging "continuing partnership in ministry with St. Paul...and its pastor, the Rev. Ross Merkel." We ask you to continue speaking out and expressing your convictions to one another, at local conference meetings, and at Synod assemblies. Silence is our enemy.

We urge you to keep your hearts and doors open to all of God's people, welcoming them and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ and the wonders of God's love. Thank you, and may God bless you all.

St. Paul Lutheran Church  
Oakland, California



organizing a "94 in 94 Campaign," identifying 94 parishes in the Bay Area which are welcoming and affirming of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Many of us know which churches are welcoming and affirming of lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Many of us know which churches are supportive. But the majority of lesbian and gay people do not.

It is our hope that when Lou Sheldon's TVC comes to town again, they will know that this city and its residents have not bought into the prejudice which they promulgate. Even more than that, it is our hope that lesbian, gay and bisexual people will know that the words "Christian" or "religious" do not stand for the type of prejudice expressed by these leaders:

*"This shameful lifestyle that destroys all it touches." (Rev. Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition)*

*"We do love the gays and we do love the lesbians. We love the alcoholics, we love the drug addicts. We love the fornicators. We love the murderers. But we oppose the lifestyle." (Rev. Jim Mahurin, Concerned Clergy Council, IN)*  
*"Since the homosexuals cannot reproduce, they must out of necessity recruit...my children and grandchildren and yours." (Dean of the University of New Mexico)*

Lesbian and gay people legitimately fear attempts by the "Right" to influence public policy and legislation throughout this nation. According to *People for the American Way*, since November 1992, roughly half of the nation's state legislatures have been involved in battles over gay-rights issues.

Through legislation, the "Right" has attempted repeatedly to: criminalize same-gender sexual activity; create regulations hostile to lesbians and gays in the areas of family, marriage, adoption and domestic partners; exclude lesbians and gays from civil rights protections or repeal gay rights ordinances; and finally, to shape educational curricula with respect to its portrayal of lesbian and gay people and our history in this country.

Because of the "Right's" vocal and visible presence, people of faith throughout this country have to go out of our way to declare solidarity with lesbian, gay and bisexual sisters and brothers. We have to visibly promote our communities of faith as safe havens where spirituality is nurtured, pastoral care received, compassion and connection experienced. We must organize together with other people of justice to help stem the growing tide of hatred and fear which attempts to quench God's promise of life and liberation!

**As** lesbian, gay and bisexual people seek to become part of communities of faith, they need coalitions like *United in Spirit*. Local networks of progressive religious people throughout this country can help them discard the misinformation of the "Right," and empower them to in their efforts to effect justice. In this struggle with the "Right," people of faith are key!

Voice & Vision: LLGM, through its work with *United in Spirit*, has been key to our Bay Area response. Voice & Vision can assist other communities to organize locally as well. Call or write the Voice & Vision office for our free resource packet, "A Pro-Active Response to the Threat of The Religious Right."

## You Can Help Fight the "Right"!

### Snoop

Get on the mailing lists of the "Right." See what they are up to.

### Collect

Organize their hatred so that it loses its power over you. Collect and display their magazines, booklets, appeals.

### Watch

Watch their TV shows. Read their columns in the newspapers. Raise your level of awareness about who they are and where they're active in your community.

### Exegete

List the common words and phrases which the "Right" uses to stir up fear and hatred, like: "gay lifestyle," "gay agenda," "special rights," "ex-gay," "promiscuous," "Love the sinner, hate the sin."

### Organize

Connect with other concerned citizens. Organize to respond to their threats and antics rapidly!

### Invite

Invite the members of your congregation to support your efforts of justice and to publicly affirm the rights of lesbian and gay people. Invite your congregation to be a safe haven which offers a community of genuine affirmation to all.

### Mobilize

Take steps to push back the rising tide of hatred. Write letters, speak at school board meetings, protect clinics, defend curricula, plan public worship services, register voters, create a speakers' bureau, etc.

### Come Out

Visibility is the key method to counteract the myths which the "Right" fabricates.



Phyllis Zillhart of Voice & Vision provided special music and Pastor James DeLange of St. Francis Lutheran Church delivered the sermon.

The Network circulated "A Call To Conscience," which was created in response to the juridical direction taken by the ELCA to situations such as Pastor Merkel's. It reads as follows:

"We, the undersigned clergy and Associates in Ministry of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, do hereby declare that we are by conscience out of compliance with the Definitions and Guidelines for Discipline (Section D) of the ELCA that requires support of the official policies of the ELCA. Because the Visions and Expectations document and the Definitions and Guidelines document discriminates against all homosexual people who are in committed relationships and especially those who are called by the Holy Spirit to pastoral ministry, requiring of them a standard of behavior that oppresses their

consciences and is antithetical to the gospel, we cannot and will not yield to the authority of these documents whether in judgment of ourselves or others." So far, approximately 48 people have signed this Call to Conscience.

## Notes from the Synod Assembly

With a theme of "One Heart, One Mind, One Mission," almost 1,000 delegates and visitors from the Sierra Pacific Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America met in Fresno, CA, April 8-10 for the Synod's seventh annual Assembly. Highlights of the Assembly are as follows:

- *The election of a new bishop:* The Assembly elected the Rev. Robert W. Mattheis, pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church, Lodi, CA, as their new bishop to replace the Rev. Lyle Miller who resigned in March to return to parish ministry. Bishop-elect Mattheis will assume office June 1, 1994. He has served the Lodi congregation since 1974 and has served on Synod Council during the first year of the Synod's life. He has chaired the Committee on Synod Documents since 1992. When asked by a Stockton, CA newspaper what Mattheis thought were important developments at this Assembly, he responded by expressing his appreciation of the support offered to the congregation of St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Oakland. This is the congregation whose pastor,

Ross D. Merkel, was recently removed from the clergy roster. Pastor Merkel is no stranger to Mattheis. Mattheis was Merkel's own pastor and has known him since he was a youth, just as former Bishop Miller was Jeff Johnson's pastor when Johnson was a young confirmand. Johnson's certification for ministry was revoked in 1989 by Bishop Miller. It can be a small world in Lutheran circles.

- *Some resolutions approved by the Assembly:*

- 1) Lamenting the ELCA's loss of Pastor Merkel from the clergy roster, and pledging the Synod's continuing partnership in ministry with Merkel and St. Paul's Lutheran Church.
- 2) Urging ELCA bylaw changes that would make it impossible to expel a pastor from the ministry for violation of the constitution, and allow members and pastors of suspended congregations to continue to serve on Synod committees.
- 3) Asking the Synod to continue to monitor and advocate funding for multicultural

ministries.

- 4) Asking the Bishop-elect to emphasize recruitment of qualified persons of color as clergy and lay professional leaders in the Synod.

- *Resolutions defeated by the Assembly:*

- 1) A resolution which would have rescinded an earlier Synod Council action calling for pastors to deliberate prayerfully and use wise pastoral discretion in decisions regarding the pastoral blessing of monogamous, covenantal, same-gender relationships.
- 2) A revised version of a resolution asking the ELCA Churchwide Assembly to receive the document "The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective" as a study resource only.

Bishop-elect Mattheis was the Presiding Minister and ELCA Bishop Herbert Chilstrom the preacher at the closing worship service. At the close of the Assembly, Voice & Vision board member, Dr. Mari Irvin commented, "As assemblies go, this one could almost be described as gay-friendly."