



Gays, lesbians form ecumenical alliances

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United Methodist gays and lesbians are being urged to put a face on the hot-button issue of homosexuality by telling their stories across the denomination.

And as they prepare to be a presence at the 2008 General Conference, they say they will no longer stand alone.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) folk in the United Methodist Church are tapping into the principles of faith-based organizing -- a new buzzword among groups working for social change.

Simply put, there's strength in numbers, and GLBT folk are now forming alliances with like-minded ecumenical and interfaith groups as they work for full inclusion in the United Methodist Church.

At the Reconciling Ministries Network's 9th Convocation, a biennial event held Aug. 2-5 this year in Nashville, participants were challenged to build networks of support to avoid burnout and to have a stronger impact in countering messages from the Religious Right.

"Relational organizing is transformative," said the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel, a United Church of Christ minister who is program director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources, a national, ecumenical collaboration of the Welcoming Church Movement.

It takes allied strength, she said, to battle the kind of fear some conservatives use as a "powerful tool" to quell equal rights for gays. And as a new mother of a 6-month-old daughter, Ms. Voelkel better understands how overriding fear motivates some people.

"Sometimes it's because we love something so much that makes us fear," she said.

Still, she urged GLBT folk to overcome conservative fears and practice instead the "foolishness of extravagant welcome" that reflects Jesus' commands to go the extra mile for one's enemies.

"Love, justice and compassion is our vocation, not fear," she said. "Serve till they see your human face. This posture isn't just about the GLBT community. It's about the gospel, because the radical right won't be using us forever. Immigrants might be the next group."

Troy Plummer, president of the Reconciling Ministries Network, an unofficial GLBT caucus in the United Methodist Church, said members need to look to Jesus' example as they seek to accomplish their mission.

"You can organize politically and lose your soul," he said. "We've forgotten how Jesus did it. Faith-based organizing requires that we care about one another . . . seeing people as more than helping you accomplish a task."

Tiffany Steinwert, an RMN board member, said the 2000 General Conference taught her that working for GLBT rights is "not a sprint, but a marathon."

"People are not changed by rational arguments," she said. "They don't change until they hear people's stories."

Gays and lesbians in other denominations would agree.

Strategizing for relational influence was critical during the biennial assembly of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) this month in Chicago. Members of the pro-gay group Lutherans Concerned planned a service and exhibitions that told the stories of lesbian and gay clergy. The national assembly fell short of permitting ordained gays but urged its bishops to refrain from defrocking gay and lesbian ministers who violate the denomination's celibacy rule.

In Nashville, United Methodist gays and lesbians started sharing their stories with one another. They included:

* A clergywoman in the California-Nevada Conference whose recently deceased longtime partner was recognized at a service for deceased clergy spouses.

* A straight laywoman in Vermont who said she is now a surrogate mom and grandma for a lesbian couple who is raising twins.

* A young, gay adult who fully expects progressive legislation enacted during a youth convocation in South Africa to be "shot down" at General Conference. He stated: "Notice is served: This younger generation is not at the same place where the current leadership [of the church] is."

* A straight seminary professor who said she found hope in the response to Judicial Council Decision 1032 that reflected these sentiments: "I am not going to be quiet. You are not going to control my life. I don't like this at all, and I'm going to work for change."

Workshops included presentations on recent Judicial Council decisions, countering homophobic use of Scripture and living openly as gays and lesbians in congregations.

The event also included worship services, forums and a drama about same-sex clergy. Dr. Amy-Jill Levine, a professor of New Testament studies at Vanderbilt University Divinity School and a presenter in the Disciple Bible Study series, led daily Bible study sessions.

The convocation was decorated with the "Showers of Stoles" display, a collection of liturgical stoles representing the lives of GLBT people of faith from 27 denominations and faith traditions.

Begun by a lesbian Presbyterian minister who received stoles of support from colleagues when she set aside her ordination in 1995, the project today has more than 1,100 stoles in the collection. Some were sent in as a memorial tribute; others are gestures of support.

"I feel I'm holding something sacred that is representative of a life," said David Lohman of the Institute for Welcoming Resources in Minneapolis, Minn., who is keeper of the stoles. The stoles, he added, are sent to nearly 200 exhibits a year at churches, conferences, seminaries and denominational gatherings.