

SPIRITUALITY

Lutheran sexuality report still in controversy

The controversy that greeted the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's preliminary report on sexuality in late October has led to the resignation of the project's chief staff member, the Rev. Karen L. Bloomquist. The report expresses an openness to recognizing same-sex marriages and calls for the 5.2 million members of ELCA to reassess anti-gay attitudes. Bloomquist had been the target of "unjust and abusive" attacks in the wake of the report's release, according to the Rev. Charles Miller, executive director of the Division for Church in Society. "Dr. Bloomquist and I agree that deliberating on the subject of sexuality is a great struggle for the church today. In the ELCA, that is evidenced in the fears and anxieties evoked by the release of the first draft of the human sexuality statement and the too-close identification of one person with the statement's development," Miller stated.

Bloomquist "reluctantly agreed" to resign from her position on the 17-member task force, which had worked for four years on the first draft of "The Church and Human Sexuality: A Lutheran Perspective." Pastor Dan Schwich, coordinator of Lutherans Concerned/Chicago, a ministry for gay and lesbian understanding, expressed concern that having Bloomquist resign from the task force would send the message that she was solely responsible for its content, a notion that he said is false. "My sense is that the fallout

over the church was so great...that some kind of large symbolic action had to take place, and removing Karen was that action," Schwich said.

"Unfortunately that reinforces the notion that this was Karen's statement. But the process assured that both the task force and the division approved the draft text." Because Bloomquist was only a part of the larger process of creating the draft, Schwich said he did not think her absence from the task force would affect the ultimate outcome of the statement. "My assumption is that the 1995 ELCA assembly will adopt some kind of social statement on human sexuality, but whether it will look anything like what this draft proposes is quite debatable," said Schwich.

The purpose of the statement, which the task force will begin revising in August 1994, is to "provide guidance for people as they live out their sexuality." The controversial issues addressed in the statement have fueled church-wide reaction. The 67-member Conference of Bishops responded to the draft by expressing disapproval of blessing same-sex unions. The draft statement said, "It is the binding commitment, not the license or ceremony, that lies at the heart of biblical understanding of marriage. In those circumstances where a legal marriage is not feasible, communities of faith may need to consider other ways of publicly affirming and communally supporting a loving, binding commitment between two people." The draft also asserted that biblical passages referring to same-sex unions are inappropriate to use "as the basis for opposing all committed, just, loving homosexual relationships today."

The report's scope extends beyond the issues of lesbians or gay men, of course, although that received the most media attention. The statement addresses premarital sex, divorce, contraception

and abstinence, and stresses the value of marriage and of confining sex to long-term, loving relationships.

Pagan Census Project

The Pagan Census Project is an attempt to document the size and diversity of the contemporary Pagan movement. The project is being coordinated by Andras Corban Arthen, founder and director of the EarthSpirit Community of Massachusetts; and Helen Berger, Ph.D., a sociology professor at West Chester State University in Pennsylvania, and a member of EarthSpirit.

The information gathered will be shared with other Pagan networking organizations and publications at their request. It will be made available to statistical bureaus, academic researchers, interfaith organizations and others interested in documenting the growth of contemporary Paganism. The project organizers hope that documenting members will create a stronger position to attain more credibility as a religion and as a community. This would give credence to addressing issues of religious discrimination and social prejudice and would give greater access to influential forums, such as academia and interfaith councils, from which Pagans have mostly been excluded.

SisterSpirit Library renovated

The SisterSpirit Library has been catalogued and expanded. The library currently consists of books, periodicals and pamphlets with an emphasis on spirituality and feminism. The collection also includes items on environmentalism, minority studies, sexual minorities, herbalism and history, as well as literary and children's collections. For more information contact Minerva, the SisterSpirit librarian, at 294-0645 or write PO Box 9246, Portland, OR 97207.

Church curriculum on AIDS available

At least 12 million adults and one million children worldwide are infected with HIV, the virus that is believed to cause AIDS. The epidemic, which threatens to spread to 40 million people by the end of the decade, can be slowed only through education. The 1.6-million-member United Church of Christ has released "Affirming Persons—Saving Lives," an ambitious 1,000-page curriculum on AIDS prevention designed for churches. "This is not only the first comprehensive AIDS prevention curriculum for churches," says Laura Lee Kent-Smith, executive director of AIDS Interfaith Network of New Jersey, "it is the best AIDS curriculum I've seen, period." UCC President Paul H. Sherry states, "With this bold step, the United Church of Christ is acting responsibly in the midst of the greatest health emergency in our time. Every family in America is potentially threatened by AIDS. This is a family-oriented and church-centered curriculum that will help parents, teachers, youth and children become partners in the education we need to protect ourselves and those we love."

"Affirming Persons—Saving Lives" was tested by teenagers, teachers and parents in regional workshops throughout the country. People living with HIV and AIDS also played a critical role in the curriculum's development. "As a person who has been living with HIV for a number of years, this curriculum gives me confidence that my church is doing everything in its power to save lives," says William Smith, a UCC member in Palm Springs, Calif. "When I began to hear about HIV, the church was practically invisible. It never occurred to me that churches could be places of healing, learning and support. That can change if this curriculum is widely used."

Compiled by Matthew Nelson, an ordained minister of the United Church of Christ

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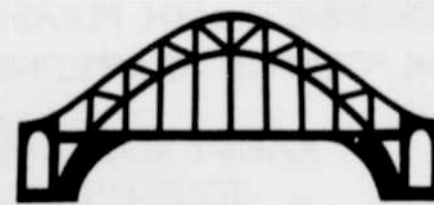
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