

local news

Into the lion's den

A group of Lane County feminist and gay-rights activists find common ground with Promise Keepers. Are they being misled?

by Inga Sorensen

Gayle Landt thinks every conflict is an opportunity.

That's why the 44-year-old director of the Eugene-based Conflict Resolution Center weighed in on the recent controversy involving a Promise Keepers gathering at the University of Oregon's Autzen Stadium.

An estimated 35,000 men participated in the event, which was held Aug. 2-3.

Promise Keepers is an evangelical Christian, male-only organization whose stated goal is to unite men "through vital relationships to become godly influences in their world." According to the organization, men must reclaim the leadership position in their families, as well as society. During the past six years an estimated 2 million men have attended the group's rallies; women are "strongly discouraged" from attending.

The group was founded in 1990 by former University of Colorado football coach Bill McCartney, who was a staunch proponent of Amendment 2, the anti-gay initiative approved by Colorado voters in 1992 and recently ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. Supreme Court.

During that highly volatile campaign, McCartney reportedly stated while on a university podium that gay men and lesbians were "an abomination against almighty God." Promise Keepers' official position is that homosexuality is a sin that "violates God's design."

In the group's book, *The Seven Promises of a Promise Keeper*, Tony Evans, a pastor from Texas, offers instruction to his male readers: "The first thing you do is sit down with your wife and say something like this: 'Honey, I've made a terrible mistake. I've given you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.' Don't misunderstand what I'm saying here. I'm not suggesting that you ask for your role back, I'm urging you to take it back. If you simply ask for it, your wife will likely [refuse]."

Not surprisingly, many people became upset when they learned that UO administrators had rented Autzen Stadium to Promise Keepers for its conference.

Margaret Butler, co-president of UO's Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Alliance, helped organize a candlelight vigil to help counteract the alienation created by the Promise Keepers' presence in Eugene.

"The Promise Keepers' implicit and explicit negative messages about women, gays and non-Christians contribute to a climate of hatred for people who fall into any of those categories," says Butler.

"While we appreciate the Promise Keepers' efforts to engage men more fully in community and family life, we have several concerns about the Promise Keepers," she said via a separate written statement. "The group's anti-denominational flavor and the desire for the submission of women are both troubling."

Matthew Scotten, president of Associated Students/University of Oregon, sent a letter to Dan Williams, UO's vice president. It reads, in part: "At issue to me, as an elected representative of the students, is not the content of the Promise Keepers' event, their faith or their mission. What concerns me is the atmosphere created by such an event, and the fact that students were never asked about or informed of the possibility of this event until the decision had been made. The fact that the presence of the Promise Keepers will create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation for women and gays and lesbians in

our community is clear, regardless of the debate about [the group's] right to be here."

According to Butler, more than 600 students signed petitions calling for the university to use the profits generated by the stadium rental fee to support an academic conference addressing "problematic issues" related to the Promise Keepers' conference.

"There were lots of people who felt alienated when they heard about Promise Keepers coming here," Butler tells *Just Out*. "It was very disconcerting."

That unease is what Landt says she wanted to try to address.

A trained mediator and lifelong Oregonian who has witnessed growing divisions between urban and rural populations, timber workers and environmentalists, OCA supporters and gay rights supporters, Landt was herself dismayed by the "enormous waste of human energy" prompted by so much dissention.

In 1994, she brought together 12 community leaders—six on "each side" of the gay and lesbian rights issue, who met for more than 120 hours. Their mission? To look for areas of agreement and an alternative to "cultural warfare" in Lane County.

According to Landt, the project, known as A New Community Meeting, was designed to provide "an environment in which formerly alienated leaders in a controversial issue meet one another, learn new conflict resolution skills, work past their limiting beliefs and negative emotions, and learn to work as allies to address the underlying interest of everyone in the community."

"This creates a very different community climate than the one characterized by frustration, rudeness and noncooperation," she says. "Noncooperation by groups of well-meaning citizens is costly to any community in terms of problems not solved and solutions not implemented."

Project participants were taught an array of skills involving listening, conflict resolution and effective dialogue. They eventually signed a statement of points they agreed upon, and Landt says some have continued to hold joint speaking engagements "or just go out for coffee."

Earlier this year, some members pondered getting more actively involved again, and then the Promise Keepers controversy emerged.

Landt helped orchestrate joint meetings with Promise Keepers supporters and leaders, as well as concerned citizens including gay men and lesbians, feminists and liberal clergy.

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She blames that on tight time constraints which hindered the ability to find wording that all could agree upon.

Seven Lane County evangelical leaders and ministers who support the Promise Keepers movement did sign, however.

"I feel a commitment to what I experienced in A New Community Meeting, and an obligation to our community to keep the level of hostility and verbal violence here from escalating because of the Promise Keepers' conference, which I believe is a good and wholesome event for our community," says the Rev. John Koekkoek, senior pastor of the Norkenzie Christian Church.

Signers agreed, in part, that there are "many diverse families and family structures in our country." They acknowledged "the worth and dignity of all people regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, age, economic status, disabilities, marital status and ethnic background."

They further maintained that they opposed discrimination—including discrimination based on sexual orientation—in "accordance with federal and state law and the human rights codes of Eugene and other communities in Oregon and the Northwest."

One of the signers, Nadia Telsey, a UO self defense instructor, says: "By signing this paper, we recognize the principle that we worked with in the 1994 A New Community Meeting process. That principle is: 'We all live in this community together.' I am grateful for the signatures of the caring evangelical ministers on this paper."

"It seems to me that they recognize that non-Christian individuals and families live here with them. I am Jewish—they acknowledge Jewish families," she continues. "I am a woman who lives with a woman—they state their respect for me and my family. My defi-

nition of respect is 'refusal to violate.' I suspect that these evangelical signers don't think that my family is the best of all possible structures—but they state their respect—that includes their refusal to harshly condemn, coerce or harm my family, and I'm grateful for that."

"The sessions I attended were about healing and building bridges," adds Henry Alley, co-chair of UO's standing committee on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues. "I ended up hugging a Promise Keeper, which is something I never thought I would do. We hugged not because we agreed, but because we found we were both committed to communication and respect."

A day after the agreement was signed, Steve Gardner, research director for the Coalition for Human Dignity, which monitors white supremacist and neo-Nazi activities, co-facilitated a teach-in in Eugene entitled "Concerns About Promise Keepers." He also attended the conference.

Gardner subscribes to the belief that Promise Keepers is best understood as a cultural manifestation and recruiting arm of the Christian right.

"This is about covert politics. All social and political movements need some kind of group to bridge the gap between, let's say, the Sunday church gathering and getting involved in promoting a conservative cause or candidate, he says.

A newly released report by the New York City-based Sterling Research Associates, describes Promise Keepers as the "third wave of the American religious right."

The first, it says, was Jerry Falwell's fundamentalist-led Moral Majority, followed by Pat Robertson's charismatic-led Christian Coalition, with its attendant grass-roots structures. Now comes Promise Keepers, with its leadership based in the non-denominational "Signs and Wonders" network of Vineyard Christian Churches.

The movement, says the report, is packing up to 70,000 recruits into massive stadium rallies nationwide, and "receives significant backing" from activists such as Focus on the Family founder James Dobson.

According to the report, Promise Keepers' distinguishing qualities include its organizational prowess (it recently organized the largest rally of clergy in history—nearly 40,000 in Atlanta's Georgia Dome) and its push to restructure the nation's social order.

"This involves explicit calls for women to be in submission to men, [and a] goal of placing Promise Keepers 'key men' into each of the nation's 400,000 churches and the establishment of thousands of local small group cells of male recruits across the country under supervision of Promise Keepers' cadre," says the report.

Sharing that analysis, Gardner wonders whether "mediation and negotiation" are appropriate given the circumstances.

"You can try to understand them, but when you attempt to negotiate with the leaders of a political movement, you undermine critics of that movement. The model may work for people in a particular group, or a conflict between individuals, but I don't think it can be applied to a political movement or very fanatical people," he says.

"People in political movements go to the table thinking, 'What can I get out of this?'" Gardner adds. "While the other side—certainly well-meaning people—go to the table saying, 'I want to feel better about this conflict. How can we understand each other?' Now, you tell me who's going to walk away from that table a winner."

I believe [the conference] is a good and wholesome event for our community," says the Rev. John Koekkoek.