

local news

The old switcheroo

Misunderstanding, expediency and lack of communication turn a conference on organized hate into an object lesson

by Inga Sorensen

The irony just drips. After all, the interdisciplinary conference "Gold Into Lead: The Alchemy of Fear in Human Communities" was designed to address "organized hate."

So it seemed over the top when the event locale was abruptly switched after some people protested the inclusion of a speaker from a lesbian organization.

Human rights advocates, including representatives from the Northwest Coalition Against Malicious Harassment, Rural Organizing Project and Coalition for Human Dignity, were set to present at the early-November conference, which was cosponsored by Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon's Cult Research Center and the National Association of Social Workers.

The gathering's purpose was to, in part, bring together an array of players from law enforcement, religious communities, social work, corrections and community groups to discuss the common elements that unite groups "dedicated to the manipulation of fear and confusion."

According to the program, "running through these groups are common threads of coercive language, manipulation of perceptions of reality.... Through these methods, the cult leader, militia commander, abuser, pimp, gang leader and terrorist are able to isolate the people in their groups and set them up to hate the 'they' outside."

Pondering solutions was a primary goal of the conference.

At first everything seemed peachy. Speakers were lined up. The conference site—the Holy Rosary Parish Center in Northeast Portland—had been selected, the programs printed and mailed.

Then Holy Rosary parishioners learned that one of the speakers was LaVerne Lewis, executive director of the Lesbian Community Project, a Portland-based social and educational organization for lesbians. Their objections prompted the church to pull its welcome mat, forcing conference planners to scramble for an alternative venue.

"Please know that this has hurt me very much, but I had so many complaints from my flock, what else could I do?" asks the Rev. Anthony Patalano, who describes his Holy Rosary congregation as extremely conservative.

Patalano says he isn't sure how parishioners got hold of the conference programs, "but when they did, word spread fast and the complaints piled up."

Patalano, who was about to leave for a work-related European trip, decided to heed parishioners' objections, and informed conference planners that the Parish Center could not be used.

He further says the controversy could have been avoided if planners—more specifically Kent Burtner, director of the EMO's Cult Resource Center—had been more forthcoming with details about the event.

"Kent and I went to seminary together. This was kind of a favor to him," says Patalano, who maintains he didn't know any of the details until long after he agreed to rent the space. "I have to say I'm somewhat disappointed in Kent."

Additionally, Patalano, who says he does not condone bigotry in any form, claims he initially tried to reason with objectors.

"I told them [Lewis] wasn't there to promote homosexuality but to talk about hate crimes," he says. "But to them there are certain buzz words, you know?"

He adds, "I have to minister to these people, too. For them it is a bastion, a place where refugees from other parishes come.... I mean, our

Sunday Mass is still performed in Latin. We can't abandon these people as kooks."

Patalano further defends his decision by adding that when the Oregon Citizens Alliance approached his church seeking approval to promote its anti-gay initiatives, it was turned away.



LaVerne Lewis

"I'm not a bigot," he says. "I grew up with homosexuality. It was around me even before I knew what the word was, believe me."

Conference chair Emily Carson, a victims' advocate for the Multnomah County District Attorney's Office, says she learned about the need for a new location via a call from Burtner about a month before the conference.

"He told me the pastor had been approached by parishioners and there was a big fuss," she says.

"Our immediate concern was finding a new location. We decided to do that, have the conference and then plan a response to the pastor," she says.

A new site—Trinity Cathedral—was secured and participants were informed of the venue change, though not the motivation behind it—until the conference, that is.

Helen Cheek, director of the Metropolitan Human Rights Commission, says she learned of the reason during welcoming remarks made by Burtner.

"He explained that some Holy Rosary parishioners had objected to a lesbian on the agenda," says Cheek. "I was shocked."

Cheek also says she noticed Lewis was not on hand, "And I thought to myself, 'Who can blame her?' I thought it was a protest," she says.

condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs," wrote Cheek, quoting the Letter from the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, which was signed by church leaders including the conservative Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger and undersigned by Pope John Paul II.

"It requires a kind of disregard for others which endangers the fundamental principles of a healthy society. *The intrinsic dignity of each person must be respected in word, in action and in law* [italics are Cheek's]."

She also quoted the Catechism of the Catholic Church, writing in part: "[Gay men and lesbians] must be accepted with respect, compassion and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided."

Additionally, she pointed to the irony of the situation: "This interdisciplinary conference addressed cultural and institutional influences which contribute to a climate in which crimes against targeted groups, such as homosexuals, can occur. It is ironic that the conference would be so directly affected by attitudes it was attempting to eradicate."

She then offered to refer Patalano to members of the Catholic Church who are well versed on issues of homosexuality "who can provide educational opportunities for you and your parishioners."

Patalano says he plans to respond to Cheek's letter, as well as write about his discomfort with the entire incident—including his own response to it—in a church bulletin.

Carson, meanwhile, says she and other conference planners intend to send Patalano a letter expressing their concern about the matter. "We'd like to get the leadership of EMO to sign it," she tells *Just Out*.

Will they? we ask.

"I don't know," she says.

EMO's Burtner did not return any of our numerous calls.

Lewis, meanwhile, questions the handling of the matter from top to bottom.

"No one from the conference even bothered to tell me what was going on. Nobody," she says.

Carson counters that the failure to inform Lewis was an oversight.

"I told a lot of people about it. I thought I had told LaVerne. I didn't realize until after the conference was over that I hadn't," she says, adding she contacted Lewis to apologize "but she was pretty mad."

Carson adds, "By far the worst thing I think that occurred here is that the pastor made an institutional decision to represent and bend to bigotry."

Lewis also says she had to call Burtner a number of times before he responded.

"When he finally returned my call four or five calls later, he basically gave me the brush off," she says. "He said, 'Yes, I know you're hurt, but you know that churches can't help themselves and we had a new venue to find.' That was it."

Lewis believes the situation could have been handled in a constructive way. She suggests it was an opportunity for relevant players to "sit down with the minister and his congregation members and discuss their concerns as well as the type of message they were sending."

"Instead, no one did anything," Lewis says, adding she is looking into the possibility that the city human rights code barring discrimination based on sexual orientation in public accommodations was violated.

"When all of this was happening, I was never invited into the discussion," she says.

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