

local news

Conference controversy

A gay and lesbian Christian conference gets the boot from a Bend church, stirring conflict and fracturing a congregation

by Inga Sorensen

It's a safe bet Patty Campbell-Schmitt, co-minister of the Bend-based First Presbyterian Church, will think twice before taking a sabbatical again.

"I was shocked when I heard what was happening," says Campbell-Schmitt, 48, who along with her co-minister husband, Tom, were savoring a little downtime this summer when they caught wind of an ensuing brouhaha involving their congregation of 600.

The issue? The church, which had been the slated venue for a September conference designed in part to "help gay people heal from their bad experiences" with Christianity, nixed the plan due to the protests of a handful of congregants.

"Not only is this ironic, it's been extremely hurtful," says Dorothy Leman, who serves on the board of Beyond the Closet, a Bend-based education and advocacy group that works for the civil rights of sexual minorities in central Oregon.

Beyond the Closet is also a leading co-sponsor of the Sept. 12-13 conference, entitled *Coming Out, Coming Home: A Place for Lesbians and Gays in the Christian Faith Community*.

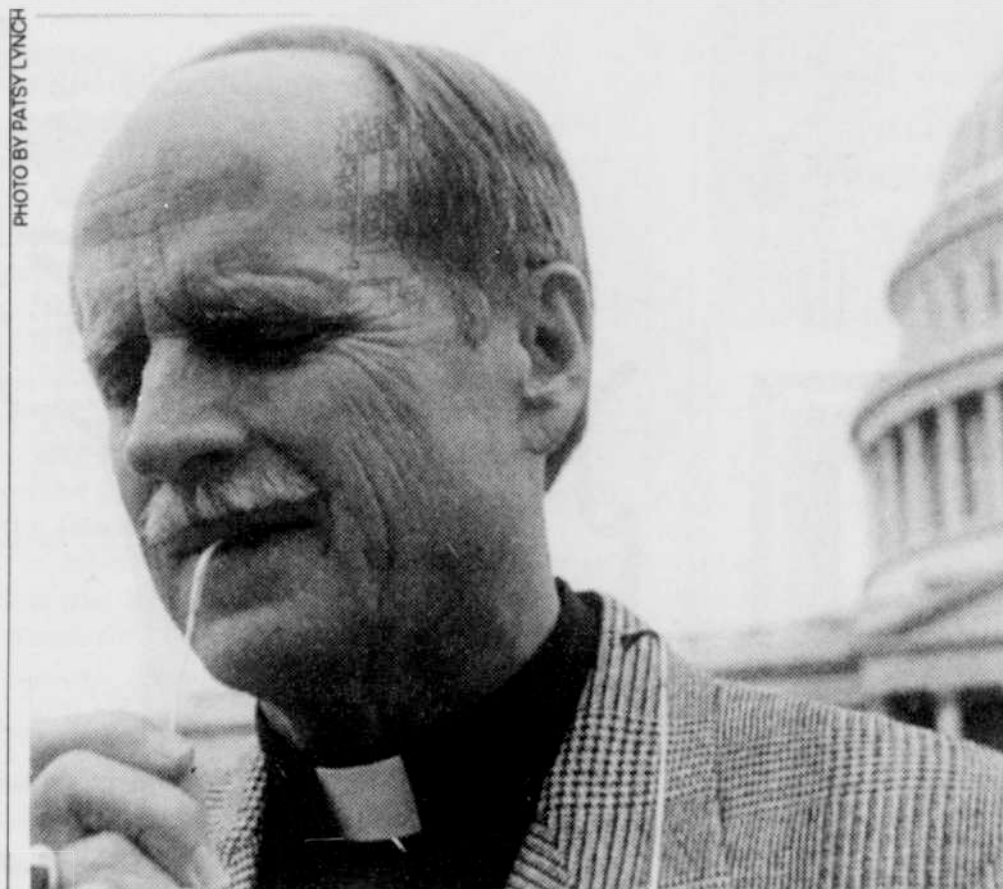
The gathering, constructed as an opportunity for "compassionate listening, not debate," seeks to "educate straight lay people and clergy...about gay issues around Christianity" as well as "help gay and straight people build church families that consciously and genuinely welcome gays and lesbians."

Planners say the conference is specifically Christian-oriented (as opposed to interfaith) because "Oregon's Measure 9 and 13 campaigns show that the 'religious' ideas used to condemn and isolate gay people have been overwhelmingly 'Christian.'"

"This conference is trying to let gay and lesbian people know they have a place in the Christian faith community," Leman says. "Then this happens and essentially confirms all their fears and skepticism."

According to Leman, everything *appeared* to be on track. Conference organizers followed all "official channels" in asking to use the First Presbyterian facility. This spring, Beyond the Closet obtained event co-sponsorship from the board of Ecumenical Ministries of Central Oregon, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, and other groups, then went to the church's Christian Concerns and Action Committee to petition to rent the building for the conference.

The matter was referred to First Presbyterian's



The Rev. Mel White

local governing body—the Session—which voted to house the conference.

Leman says while the rental contract had not been signed, Beyond the Closet interpreted the affirmative vote as a verbal contract, and created brochures and other outreach materials citing First Presbyterian as the gathering's location.

A month later, new members of the Session voiced additional concern about the conference and an additional vote was taken.

They, too, backed renting the facility—but this time asked that any event publicity include a disclaimer distinguishing the views and goals of the conference from those of the church.

Leman says six couples in First Presbyterian's congregation then began voicing "strong opposition" to the conference.

She says an informational congregational meeting was held Aug. 3, during which the majority of those present seemed to support housing the event. No matter—Leman says the following day, the Session switched its previous positions and denied the conference access to the church facility.

"This is a heart-breaking incident. We need to call [attention] to the homophobia present here, while remaining thankful to our supporters at First Presbyterian, and compassionate to those Session members who let fear of polarization

sway their vote," says Beyond the Closet board member Catherine Finney. "Their fear of conflict and fracture is particularly interesting to me. No movement against oppression...has occurred in the absence of conflict. Spiritual conflict is what can turn our hearts towards justice. I wish that all of the church elders had been courageous enough to see that."

The Campbell-Schmitts, meanwhile, were away on sabbatical as the controversy began bubbling. In fact, Patty Campbell-Schmitt says she thought the conference (at First Presbyterian) was a go.

When she learned the road was getting rocky, she was "shocked," largely because of the congregation's past associations with gay and lesbian issues.

According to Campbell-Schmitt, First Presbyterian officially opposed the anti-gay ballot measures 9 and 13 in 1992 and 1994, respectively. She also says the church is the site of local PFLAG meetings. Additionally, First Presbyterian held a six-week discussion group a few years back on homosexuality and the church.

"So we didn't see [the conference] as a big deal...but I guess we underestimated the reactions of some people," she tells *Just Out*.

Campbell-Schmitt says it appears a "small but vocal—and persuasive—group" of congregants

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opposed the conference being held at the church facility.

"It was very unsettling to hear their concerns because they were bringing up stereotypes that the Oregon Citizens Alliance had always pushed—pedophilia and that type of thing," she says. "I think we're continuing to experience the fallout from the OCA campaigns."

Campbell-Schmitt also suggests had she and her husband been accessible early on, the outcome may have been different.

"Perhaps better communication could have been fostered," she says.

The controversy, meanwhile, has torn the congregation, which includes outspoken PFLAG parents.

"Many people are hurt," she says, "but I think there have been positives out of all this. As you can imagine, there has been lots and lots of discussion within the congregation over this issue."

She also anticipates more First Presbyterian Church members will attend the conference than initially thought as a direct consequence of the controversy.

(Ironically, those who have announced they are leaving the congregation in light of the incident—as many as a dozen, Campbell-Schmitt says—are those who advocated booting the conference.)

Event organizers, meanwhile, are moving ahead with the gathering, which features, among others, the Rev. Mel White, author and former speechwriter for Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, Nancy Wilson, senior pastor of the Metropolitan Community Church in Los Angeles, Otis Charles, retired Episcopal bishop of Utah and current director of the Episcopal Diocese of California's gay and lesbian ministry, and Bernard Turner, retired pastor of the First Baptist Church in McMinnville. Turner is a straight pastor of a rural Oregon church who gradually grew to see the responsibility of Christian churches to welcome gay and lesbian people.

According to Leman, the conference will be held at the Bend-based Spiritual Awareness Center, whose administrators offered the facility to the conference immediately upon learning of the Session's action.

Coming Out, Coming Home: A Place for Lesbians and Gays in the Christian Faith Community will be held at the Spiritual Awareness Center, 157 NW Franklin St. in Bend on Sept. 12-13. Cost is \$25. For more information, call *Beyond the Closet* at (541) 317-8966.

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