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KEEPING THE FAITH

'SPIRITUALITY INFORMS MY WHOLE LIFE'

The Rev. Frodo Okulam begins her days with spiritual rituals.

"When I get up in the morning," says Okulam, "I'm smudging and lighting my candles. That's how my day begins, that's how it ends." At no moment in between does the spirituality end.

"Basically my spirituality informs my whole life," Okulam observes. "Everything that I do should have a spiritual basis—and pretty much does."

Okulam's life wasn't always touched by the Goddess, as she refers to her deity. She recalls going to Methodist Sunday school as a child but being fascinated mostly by lessons about other religions. Her earliest, most sincere form of spirituality, says Okulam, was communing with nature. "My early spirituality was based on nature, talking to trees," she explains.

She needed something more, though, when she began to discover her sexuality. "It was very clear from early on that there was something different about my sexuality," remembers Okulam, telling how discovering her queerness at the age of 12 in the late 1960s made her suicidal.

She credits the Goddess with saving her: "The Goddess intervened. It was definitely a female voice. She said, 'I made you for a reason and I have plans for you.' It wasn't a thought I would've had myself."

Those plans may have had a lot to do with spirituality, as that's where so much of Okulam's life today lies. She's a coordinator at SisterSpirit, a group dedicated to celebrating women's spirituality; an ordained Metropolitan Community Church pastor; and Wiccan high priestess.

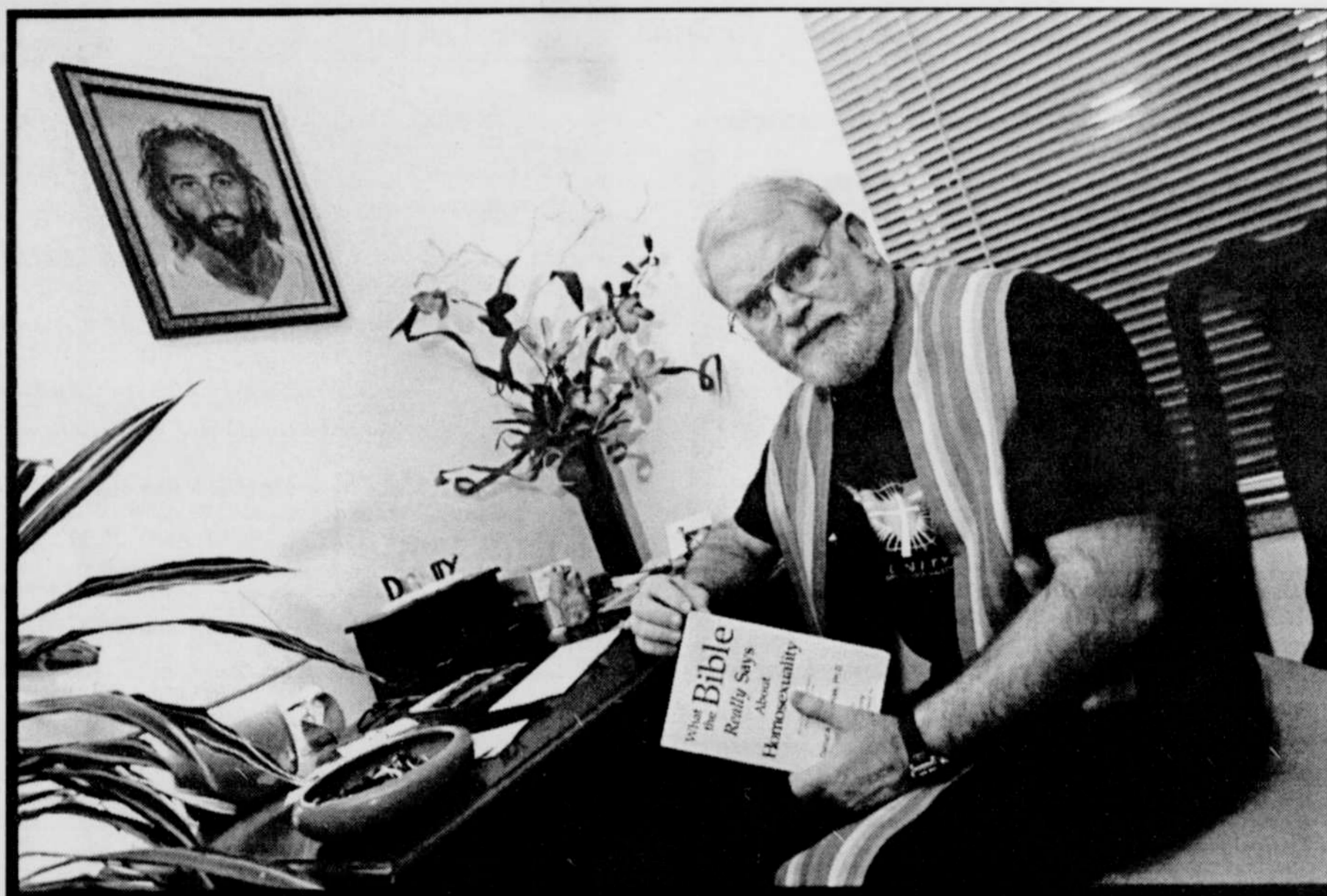
"The label I use most often is 'women's spirituality,'" she explains. "I worship the Goddess. I say I'm a Christian pagan or a pagan Christian. Then there's Wicca. They all apply."

This union of religions wasn't always so easy for Okulam to orchestrate. "When I first came to MCC, there were a lot of people who said, 'This pagan shouldn't be in this church,'" Okulam recalls with a laugh. She adds that she has no conflict between her paganism and her Christianity, but concedes, "You have to take the patriarchy out of it for there not to be a conflict."

For Okulam, there are pressing reasons to introduce mainstream spirituality to less orthodox spirituality. "Nature, spirituality, the whole 'New Age' thing is becoming more important," she says. "If the mainstream traditions get it, maybe we'll be able to rescue the planet from ecological destruction."

To that end, Okulam continues on her path to improving her own spiritual life and at least one obvious method: Confesses Okulam, "I'm trying to talk to trees more."

BY WILL O'BRYAN AND PATRICK COLLINS • PHOTOS BY LINDA KLIEWER



Above: Jerry Deas; below: Henry Miller (left) and Rick Hernandez

'IT REALLY IS LIFE SAVING'

Speaking with Rick Hernandez and Henry Miller can give you a case of spiritual whiplash. Back and forth they go, embracing religious and political contradictions as fragile as a porcelain statue of a saint. The question, held under wraps as long as

possible, is this: How can you be a Mormon and queer?

"I joined as an adult, out of personal convictions," says Hernandez. He and Miller have been partners for 13 years now; Miller, in fact, played the organ for his lover's confirmation service. "The mission leader had a gay son, so he was very sympathetic," Hernandez explains. "But most of the people at the service didn't know I was gay."

That was years ago, in a conservative enclave north of San Diego. Now the two live in North-

portland and are active in a group known as Affirmation, an international, volunteer-led effort for queer Mormons that sponsors monthly activities. The group has existed for 21 years, and 200 people attended its 20th annual conference, held Labor Day weekend in Portland.

"The church has no comment about us," says Miller, who was born into the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and considers it a part of his social and cultural heritage, even though he and Hernandez no longer attend services. "They're hoping we will go away."

But Affirmation, it becomes clear after speaking with these two, is here to stay.

"The church is part of your everyday life, and when they threaten to cut that off because you're queer, that's a bad place to be," says Hernandez. "When people start wondering how long they can keep up the charade, they can come to Affirmation, a safe place where for the first time ever they can articulate their feelings and think about making choices for themselves while being honest and respected. Here, they know they won't lose their community."

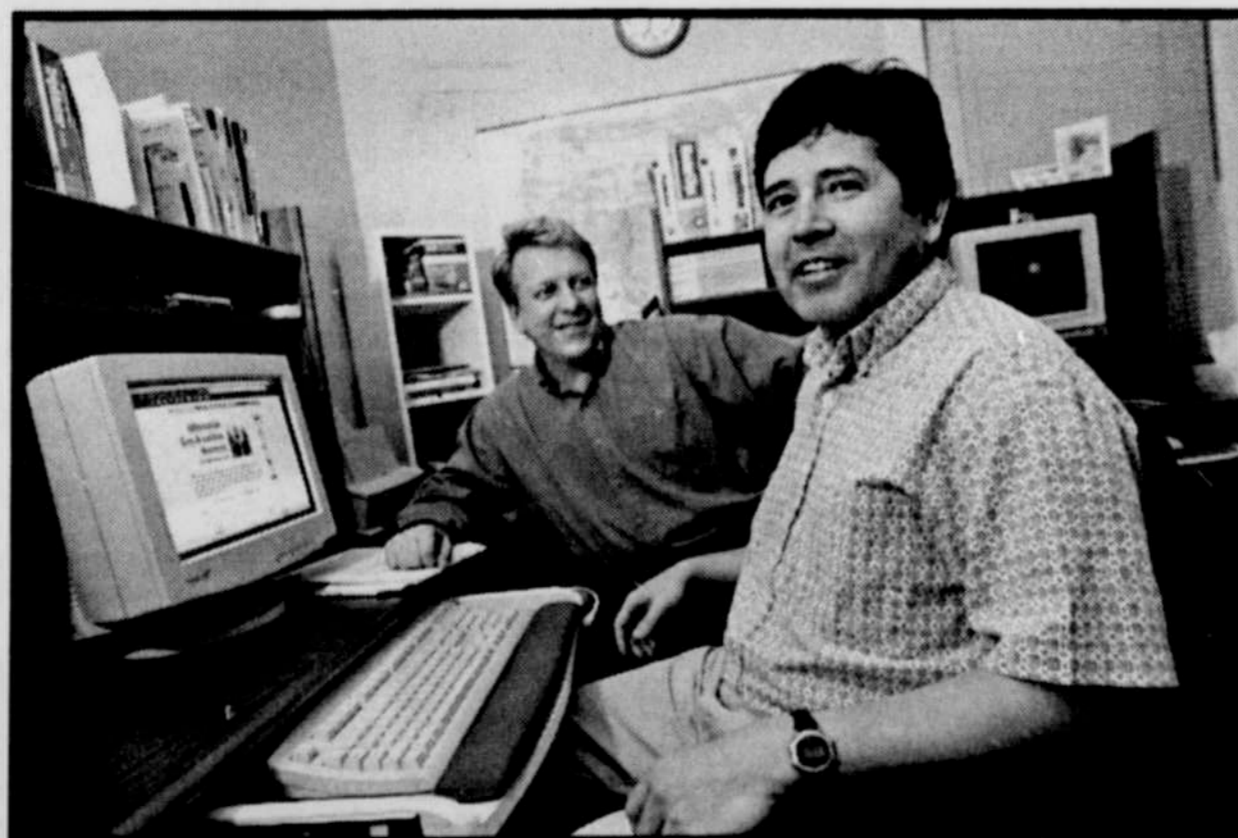
Miller couldn't agree more. "For many people, Affirmation is the first place they are able to ask questions and really think about the answers for themselves," he says, adding that he struggled trying to figure out how to live outside the box drawn by the Mormons. "A lot of people are ready to commit suicide, but then they come here and discover that they're not alone. In that way, it really is life saving."

'THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND THE HURTING CATHOLIC'

The Catholic Church conjures lots of emotions. Champion of the planet's impoverished masses on one hand, powerful condemner of homosexual sex, birth control, and blasphemous art on the other. The Catholic Church may be hard to pin down definitively, but one thing's certain: It's not going away. Neither is Jerry Deas.

Deas, who lives in Portland, is the national secretary of Dignity USA, a group of gay Catholics with more than 3,000 members in 75 chapters.

"Dignity hasn't been welcomed in church circles," admits Deas. "But it does provide a bridge for individuals... We become the bridge between the church and the hurting Catholic."



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