

NORTHWESTnews

LEADING A CRUSADE

Faithful gays prepare to counter an upcoming Portland conference that considers homosexuality treatable and preventable

by Timothy Krause

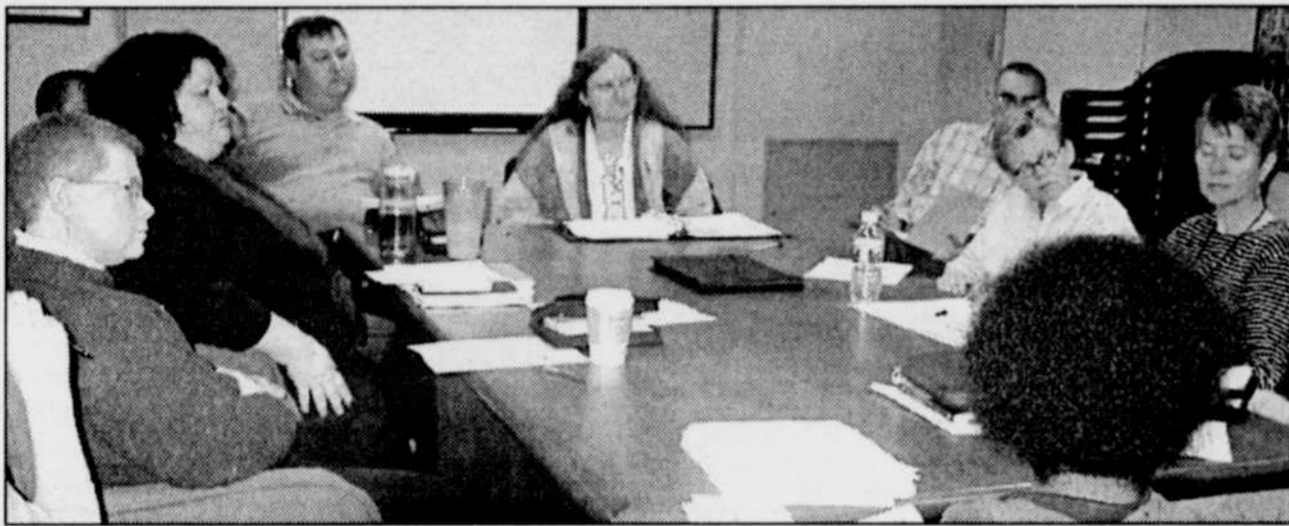


PHOTO BY MARY DAVIS

Spiritual and political community members meet April 8 to prepare for Love Welcomes All

Portland's progressive spiritual leaders have begun to plan a grassroots response to the Love Won Out anti-gay conference scheduled for June 21 at New Hope Community Church near Clackamas Town Center.

"We are concerned clergy and people of faith who are coming together to offer a different voice to counter the misinformation and damage that is being done to families and individuals from many faith traditions," says David Dornack, pastor of Rose City Park Presbyterian Church.

The local initiative, called Love Welcomes All, will be held the same day, and organizers hope the event will offer an affirming and inclusive alternative for Christians struggling with their sexuality.

"Ours is a response to stop the spiritual abuse of people by such programs as Love Won Out," explains Dornack. "It concerns us when others use untruth, fear and what we consider to be misinformation to confuse and mislead people."

The committee planning Love Welcomes All was first convened earlier this year by Basic Rights Oregon.

"The impact of anti-gay ministry and reparative therapy on people in our community is devastating," says BRO executive director Roey Thorpe, explaining the organization's involvement. "We work on social change with a variety of different strategies, and we recognize that legislation is not the only way to create social change."

The informal alliance now includes representatives from Metropolitan Community Church, Bridgeport and Ainsworth congregations of United Church of Christ, First Unitarian, Sister-Spirit, Interfaith Spiritual Center, Oregon Farm Worker Ministry and the Community of Welcoming Congregations. "We are individuals who are here for the duration and not just the one-day, big-splash event with presenters who don't have an investment with or for the people they will be talking about," notes Dornack.

Although still in the planning stage, Love Welcomes All will feature a keynote speaker along with several breakout sessions addressing topics of faith and sexual life. A concert of contemporary Christian music by lesbian performer Marsha Stevens will precede the conference.

"We hope that people will learn that reparative therapy, or conversion therapy, is based on an understanding of sexuality that has been rejected by all major health and mental health associations," remarks Dornack. "Our hope and prayer is that love will truly win out and that fear, hatred and ignorance will one day disappear."

New Hope Community Church agreed to play host to the anti-gay conference because, according to executive pastor David Boots, the congregation believes in the ministry and values of the event's presenter, Focus on the Family.

"We believe the Bible speaks clearly to the particular issue of homosexuality," he says. "Our church exists not only to encourage Christians but to present Jesus Christ to pre-Christians as well, in the hope that they will come to a saving knowledge of Him. Perhaps that goal will be accomplished through this conference as well."

Organizers from Focus on the Family say attendance has increased 25 percent during the past six years. Some locations have attracted as many as 1,000 participants, each paying \$40-\$50 to attend. The seminars target queer and questioning Christians, families and clergy with a message that homosexuality is wrong and can be overcome through a combination of faith and family.

"We want people to know that they don't have to be gay," states the organization's Web site. "Homosexuality is preventable and treatable."

Sessions typically promote the organization's theory that family dynamics, rather than biology, are the root of same-sex desires. Action steps to confront gay-affirmative curricula in schools are the topic of a public policy session, while a multimedia presentation "reveals" the impact of gay activism on Western culture.

Among the speakers has been "ex-gay" leader and conference creator John Paulk, who has managed the ministry's Homosexuality and Gender Department since 1998. However, he announced April 14 that he will resign his leadership role in May and relocate to the Pacific Northwest. A change of career, he says, will allow him to spend more time with his "ex-lesbian" wife and three sons.

"My time at Focus on the Family has been the most rewarding professional and ministry experience of my life," Paulk said in a statement. "I will always have a heart for men and women struggling with homosexuality, but after working 16 years on this contentious issue, it's time for me to pursue other endeavors."

Paulk was at the center of a scandal in 2000 when he was spotted at a Washington, D.C., gay bar and subsequently removed as chairman of Exodus International, the umbrella organization for "ex-gay" ministries worldwide.

Although representatives say Paulk's departure will not affect future Love Won Out conferences, it was unclear whether he would still speak at the Portland engagement. □

For more information about the anti-gay LOVE WON OUT conference, visit www.lovewonout.com. To learn more about the local LOVE WELCOMES ALL response, contact Basic Rights Oregon at 503-222-6151 or roey@basicrights.org. Organizers also seek "ex-ex-gays" willing to share their personal experiences with reparative and conversion therapies.

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