

ENGAGING DIALOGUE

Workshop teaches queers how to discuss same-sex marriage with opponents

by Michael Burdick

Suddenly, same-sex marriage has been propelled to the forefront of national attention. Many queers have been taken by surprise at how quickly this has happened, having lost hope that the United States would grant equal marriage rights anytime soon or that it would even seriously consider doing so.

The matter took on new life after a couple of high courts ruled on the side of justice. Things really heated up when President Bush's PR team realized the controversy might help him keep his job through the upcoming election, by energizing his core supporters and distracting everyone from his failed policies.

The established wisdom held that there is a consensus in the United States against same-sex marriage. Surveys consistently show a majority disapprove, though the number opposed has been slowly shrinking for years, falling to 53 percent in a Pew poll last July. For Bush to take up the cause against same-sex marriage would please his supporters in the religious right wing while being potentially popular with the nation at large.

Republicans are united against same-sex marriage, while Democrats are evenly split. The situation is ideal for Bush, he thinks, because it unites his base and divides his opponents. Democrats will be forced to either take a principled stand against apparent popular opinion or risk the wrath of gay rights activists and advocates for equality and justice everywhere.

For his opening salvo, Bush pleased his gay-hating supporters by expressing, with furrowed brow, his belief that limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples "ought to be codified in some way." In his State of the Union address Jan. 20, after a token nod toward respecting individuals, he declared support for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution banning same-sex marriage, saying this was necessary to stop the "activist judges" from threatening the "sanctity" of marriage.

With the White House and the makeup of Congress hanging in the balance, how the public responds to this issue in the coming months will have widespread consequences. If queer activists



Bonnie Tinker outlines an effective debating tactic to workshop participants Jan. 17

can help it, the ruckus Bush is raising around same-sex marriage will lead people to talk about and re-evaluate their positions. The time is ripe for a sea change in national thinking, and some believe it is our responsibility as queer U.S. citizens to participate in this dialogue.

With this in mind, Love Makes a Family played host to a workshop Jan. 17 titled "Engagement! Strategies for Talking About Same-Sex Marriage." About 15 people gathered to prepare for effectively discussing and debating the issue.

After bringing everyone up to date with the latest news about same-sex marriage, workshop leaders Bonnie Tinker and Cecil Prescod explained a debating tactic that they have found particularly effective, not just in formal debates but in any conversation where two people are discussing something they don't completely agree on. The technique is effective for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is that it helps curb the ubiquitous devolution of modern political discourse.

"We often see debates and discussions where there's one side yelling at the other side and they're talking past one another," Prescod explains. "And because they have...such distinct, separate, philosophical political religious reasons it is often difficult to have meaningful dialogue."



The four-step technique is known as LARA: listen, affirm, respond, add. First, you should listen carefully to what your "opponent" is saying and where he or she is coming from.

"We live in a culture of dominance," Tinker says. "The trick is to move it from that kind of thing where all you're trying to do is dominate."

Tinker says what we expect in a debate is that the participants will always be listening for errors or misstatements they can use to make their opponent look foolish, listening for opportunities to hijack the conversation, listening for openings to denounce the other side. With the LARA technique, you listen instead for something in your opponent's argument that you agree with, "something you might even have said yourself," she explains.

In the next step, you affirm something that your opponent said. This shows respect for your opponent and has a disarming effect because it is surprising and unexpected. It gets your opponent's attention and sets the stage for your next step—respond. Here you answer the question your opponent asked, or somehow respond to the point he or she was making. This is in contrast to debates on the evening news where it's all about ignoring your opponent's points and staying "on message."

In the final step, you add new information to the discussion. This is where you say what you really wanted to say all along.

It is a lot easier to understand the power of this technique with a little practice. After holding a brainstorming session to come up with a list of all the arguments against same-sex marriage that queers are likely to encounter, the meeting broke into small groups to practice the LARA method.

In one example, the opponent says, "Gay relationships are an unhealthy environment for children." Listening to that is one thing, but what can you affirm about it? One way to go is, "We all want children to grow up healthy and happy." From there you can respond to the opponent's point by saying something like, "There's no evidence that living in a gay family is harmful to children," and then you can add, "Besides, the love parents have for their children is a lot more important than what gender the parents are."

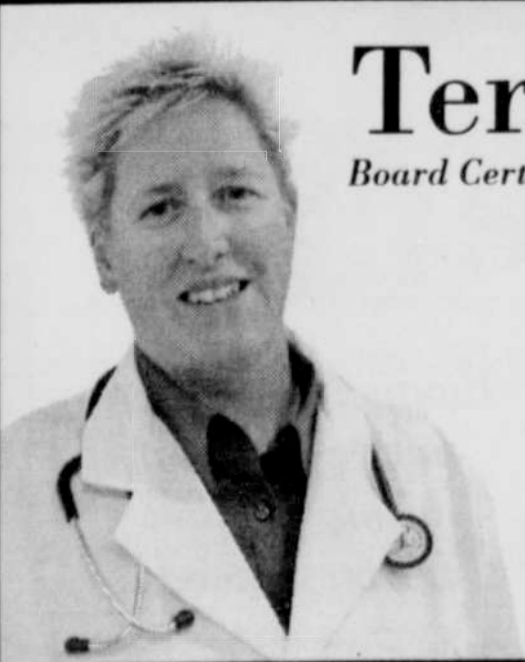
After practicing the method for a while, participants regrouped and discussed what had come up in their sessions. The distinction between civil marriage and marriage as a sacrament had been particularly thorny. Some participants thought that queers should leave religion out of these discussions and try to argue only for civil marriage rights, based on equality under the law. Others felt that the subject can't be de-spiritualized—that many people's opinions on the matter are fused with religious beliefs. Such people would never agree to civil gay marriage on earthly grounds, and therefore the only way to reach them would be to engage them in debates about spiritual matters.

One surprise at the workshop came from Pam, a participant who helped put the sanctity of marriage in a larger context. She cited Yale historian John Boswell, "who did some research at the Vatican library, and what he found is that originally heterosexual marriages were legal affairs because they involved property and children and procreation. It was gay marriages that were recognized by the [Catholic] Church because they were recognized as purely a matter of love and commitment. So they were a sacrament...and that pre-dates heterosexual marriages being recognized in the church."

The workshop ended with a call for volunteers who would be available to hold up our side of the debate at other events or to the press when such opportunities arise during the coming months. □

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