

THE ^{portable} GAY & LESBIAN READER

The Old, Old Story

THE WIND HOWLS AROUND A dozen marchers in the minus 20 degree weather. They are gathered at the entrance of the Halifax convention centre protesting a conference that has been labelled homophobic by lesbian and gay groups.

by **Padraic Brake**

Inside the centre Pat Allan, an "ex-lesbian," addresses the crowd. She says the absence of her mother was one of the reasons for her "becoming a homosexual" because the "need (of my mother) became unmet."

A woman in the left aisle shouts, "What about single parents! Using that theory, there'd be a lot more lesbians out there!"

Entitled "Homosexuality and the Church," the one day conference offered "freedom from homosexuality." Two funda-

mental Christian ministries, New Beginnings and the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF) organized the conference.

According to Barrett Horne, divisional director of IVCF, the conference was meant "to educate Christians about the biblical perspective of homosexuality."

But Robert Allen of the Nova Scotia Persons With AIDS Coalition compares the message of the conference to holocaust revisionist Jim Keegstra. "It's based on the premise that homosexuality is some kind of sin."

Pat Allan has been a member of New Beginnings Ministry for four years, and was elected to the Board of Exodus International last summer. Her seminar included testimony that she is "ex-lesbian," but by the end of the day, she called herself a "heterosexual, with some people pushing me towards finding a man."

Allan became nervous as she "explained how she became gay" to over sixty people. The crowd included representatives of IVCF and almost a dozen different lesbian and gay groups within the city.

Wood says he did not like Allan's premise that people become gay. "Heterosexuals and homosexuals are what they are. We don't decide to be gay."

THE GAY AND LESBIAN community's anger over the presence of Walter Schlech, one of the speakers at the conference was evident. Schlech, according to Horne, was scheduled to give a seminar on "the psychological and spiritual implications for people with AIDS."

Walter Schlech is one of the most well-respected AIDS researchers in Atlantic Canada. He is an associate professor of medicine at Dalhousie University and a member of the National Advisory Council on AIDS.

Slech is also, as the conference's literature says, "a committed Christian and elder at the First Congregational Church of Halifax." The First Congregational broke away from the United Church of Canada when it decided to allow congregations to elect lesbian or gay ministers.

Slech gave a straightforward slide show on statistics about the spread of AIDS, the numbers of people living with AIDS, and the number of reported deaths.

An official with the PWAC asked Pat Allan about the purpose of Schlech's seminar within the context of the other lectures during the day.

Allan said the point of the seminar is "to address the myth that AIDS is not a gay disease."

A Roman Catholic priest in the audience replied, "as you present it, it reaffirms in people's minds that AIDS is a gay disease."

Pat Allan's main defense behind choosing Schlech for the conference was "(New Beginnings) also works with AIDS victims, so we wanted to tell people about the myths around AIDS."

One member of the audience says that he questions the ministries' knowledge of working with persons living with AIDS, and the care they give, if they did not even know that "there are no victims of AIDS."

IN AN INTERVIEW during the conference Allan said her ministry would be interested in establishing a local ministry for people "desiring freedom from homosexuality," but it "would depend on a number of factors." Not the least of which, she says, was "finding someone to volunteer their time."

Most of the ministries within the Exodus International coalition are run by one person. "We may be looking at the possibility of a ministry like New Beginnings establishing itself locally in the near future," says Robert Allen.

During the last seminar of the day, entitled "Ministry to the Homosexual," Pat Allan went into great detail on how to counsel someone looking for a "way out." She says, "The intent was to educate Christians" on what to do if they came across another person that needed help.

Allan was asked whether she would help the local lesbian and gay community by signing a petition that would amend the provincial human rights act to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual discrimination.

She says that her board, Exodus International, "prevents her from being involved in any political activity."

When someone pointed out that signing a petition was not a political issue but one of basic human rights, she responded that her "hands were tied."

Another activity of New Beginnings that particularly concerns the PWAC is their work with persons living with AIDS. One "ex-gay ministry," Worthy Creations, has established a live-in centre called Victory House in Fort

Lauderdale, Florida for persons with AIDS.

In the Summer 1987 edition of the Exodus Standard (published by Exodus International - North America) there is a report of a man named Johnny, the first resident of Victory House. He is described as "accepting Jesus 10 days later and his health is improving already."

"What they are doing is taking people when they may have no support, and giving them the alternative of continuing that way, or being part of their ministry," says Wood.

As the conference ended, a man in the back of the room stood up and said that he was "desiring freedom from homosexuality."

"I do not share (Allan's) religious convictions, but I do want out," he said.

THE CONFERENCE was originally planned for the basement of St. Paul's Anglican Church hall. According to Horne, the conference was moved because "the hall could not accommodate the number of people that eventually signed up to attend."

Some had suggested that the Bishop of the Anglican Church forced the organizers to move because Bishop Peter did not like the media attention that the conference was attracting. Horne denied this was the case.

Horne was expecting between 10 to 15 people to pay the \$10 registration fee, far less than the final tally.

The lesbian and gay community became aware of the conference by accident when a minister, who wishes to remain anonymous, was given the conference pamphlet to pass around to Christians within his ministry.

"It was going to be a gay bashing conference," says the minister. He says he brought a copy to the PWAC so "they would know that it was going on."

Hodder says, "We organized ourselves to respond to the conference."

Representatives of GALA, PWAC, the Metro Committee on AIDS, Lesbian and Gay Rights Nova Scotia, Gays and Lesbians at Dalhousie, Sparrow, Dignity, Affirm and others met to do just that. Hodder says it was the first time that such a broad coalition of the lesbian and gay community in Halifax had formed over one external issue.

The strategy was simple, to attend the conference and mix with others that would be in attendance. If any lesbians or gays could not afford the fee, GALA would pay it. Lesbians and gays entered the convention centre separately, mingled with the crowd, and after talking with the people next to them mentioned, "by the way, I happen to be a lesbian."

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