

Local News

Affirmation Holds DC Conference

Speakers include 'Facing East' playwright, Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson, cowboys

BY JOSELLE VANDERHOOF
JOSELLE@QSALTLAKE.COM

The country's oldest support organization for former and current gay and lesbian members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has celebrated several milestones this year, including its 30th anniversary.

It also managed to get an author, an Episcopal bishop, several political activists and even a troupe of gay dancing cowboys together under the same hotel roof.

Jonathan Rauch (author of *Gay Marriage: Why It's Good for Gays, Good for Straights, and Good for America*), Episcopal Bishop V. Gene Robinson, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Executive Director Matt Foreman and the DC Cowboys were just some of the keynote speakers and performers who inspired and entertained 267 Affirmation members at "Affirmation Conference 2007: A More Perfect Union," held in Washington, D.C. Oct. 5-7. And Conference Committee Chairman Dave Melson couldn't have been happier with

the speakers and entertainers.

"One of the advantages of [holding the conference in] D.C. is the plethora of speakers you don't get to hear out West," said Melson, who also resides in Washington, D.C.

While several speakers addressed the state of gay rights in America, including such things as gay marriage, building a family through adoption and working with religious communities to counter anti-gay discrimination, others spoke on issues specifically related to Mormonism. Bridget Foster and her husband Will, who founded the Safe Space Coalition to address anti-gay rhetoric from LDS leaders, discussed the pros and cons for gay and lesbian Mormons interested in leaving or remaining in the church. Soulforce Riders Matt Kulisch, Emil Pohlig and Mike Cramer also talked about their experiences on the 2007 Equality Ride, during which they visited Brigham Young University to protest its policies towards gay and lesbian students. Utah playwright and



Openly gay Episcopal Bishop Gene Robinson addressed the Affirmation Conference 2007 in Washington, D.C.

author Carol Lynn Pearson also discussed her hit play *Facing East*, which deals with a Mormon family's attempts to come to terms with their gay son's suicide.

Notably, Bill Russell, a scholar and member of LDS "sister church" The Community of Christ (formerly the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) spoke about the strides his church has made in recognizing gays and lesbians as full members.

"The people I've talked to feel that the Community of Christ is going to accept same-sex unions soon," said Melson.

The 2007 conference also gave attendees several opportunities to attend events outside of the conference, including a discussion about Native American culture and gender identity at the National Museum of the American Indian, and a walking tour of Capitol Hill.

Interestingly, the conference weekend coincided with AIDS Walk Washington, a benefit for the Whitman-Walker Clinic, which serves gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender people and people with HIV/AIDS in D.C. and northern Virginia. Affirmation partnered with the clinic, and attendees who signed up to walk received a discount from their conference fee.

"We wanted to help attendees get involved with a number of other gay organizations in the city," said Melson.

The Whitman-Walker Clinic also partnered with the Elizabeth Taylor Health Center for a frank talk about sexual health in the Saturday workshop "Talking to Your Partner and Other LGBTI Health Issues."

"We're both a religious and an LGBT organization, and the issues both of those have in common need to be ad-

ressed," said Melson. "Gay Mormons in particular are hesitant to discuss those issues [related to things like safer sex and sexually transmitted infections], especially if they live in, say, Utah or Idaho and it might be hard to come out to a doctor. This was a perfect audience for this type of talk. I think education is needed more in the LDS gay community than in the gay community at large."

Ultimately, Bishop V. Gene Robinson was one of the conference's most notable speakers for Melson. An openly gay man, Robinson was elected as New Hampshire's Episcopal Bishop in 2003. He has been at the center of heated debate in the Anglican Communion, the worldwide organization of churches to which Episcopal Church in the United States of America belongs, over the morality of same-sex unions and the place of gays and lesbians in the church.

"If you want someone to speak on gay religious issues, probably no one in the country is more qualified than he is," said Melson. "Many issues he faced are similar to ours."

According to Melson, Robinson's address included the following quote:

"The church is wrong if it tells you that you are going to hell because you're gay. You are not going to hell, you are going back to the God that created you, and loved you from the moment you were conceived. God loves the fact that you are gay and loves your relationships."

In closing, Melson said Robinson told all in attendance to witness to the world about the goodness of gay people and their relationships.

"Now, tell me that's not an LDS message," he laughed. ☺

101.9 THE END PRESENTS

THE ENGLISH DEATH

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 15

TICKETS AVAILABLE AT ALL 467-TIXX • 1-800-888-TIXX WWW.SMITHSTIX.COM THE DEPOT BOX OFFICE (TUES-FRI 3:00-6:30, SAT NOON-6:00, SHOW DAYS OPEN AT 3:00 • NO SERVICE FEE)

400 WEST SOUTH TEMPLE AT THE GATEWAY 801-456-2888 • WWW.DEPOTSLC.COM All events subject to change • VIP Seating —801-456-2802 A private club for members



Support your advertisers as they support you. Tell them you saw them in QSaltLake