

Targeted News Service

Article Of Faith: Reflections On 2008 From A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual And Transgender Faith Perspective

The National Religious Leadership Roundtable, convened by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, takes a look back at the critical episodes of the past year in the struggle for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) equality from a faith perspective.

Article of Faith

by the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel

National Religious Leadership Roundtable

The month of December offers us the opportunity to pause and take stock of all that has happened in the preceding year. For people of faith, this reflection is often done in the context of religious celebrations.

Bodhi Day for Buddhists invites practitioners to remember the enlightenment of the Buddha and each of our own journeys toward enlightenment. Winter Solstice for pagans lifts up the reality that, although the night and the darkness seem deep, the light and new life will return. Eid al Adha for Muslims reminds the faithful of the trust Ibrahim placed in Allah and his willingness to sacrifice that which he loved most. Part of the celebration is sharing food with those who are hungry. Hanukkah for Jews marks the rededication of the Temple and the promise that liberation and survival are God's hope for us. Christmas for Christians lifts up the hope of light in the midst of darkness and the reality that God will always be born in our midst. And Kwanzaa for African Americans of many faith traditions calls us back to the core values that ground and root community and family.

Each of these sacred celebrations lifts up the importance of taking time to pause, consider, reflect and pray. And out of that pausing and praying, to find renewed ways to act for a more just, a more peaceful, a more humane world.

For those of us who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people of faith, there is much on which to reflect in 2008.

We were brought back to the beginnings of our struggle with the death of Del Martin and the opening of the film Milk. Both remind us of how far we've come and how far we have to go -- that we can name some of those whose courage started our public movement over 50 years ago and that now there are so many of us who are visible that it is impossible to count. Still, two transgender women were executed in Iraq for openly living their lives and the federal hate crimes bill has not yet passed.

We marked the 10th anniversary of the Transgender Day of Remembrance with the largest number of worship services ever. This is both a testament to our community's resilience and the ongoing tragedy of continued killings and executions. In so many communities, the intersections of race, class and gender are highlighted by the fact that so many of those killed are poor or working class people of color. Yet we light candles and sing songs and we refuse to let hatred or death be the final word. Life -- that is our response to those who would try to silence and kill us.

As thousands of couples joyously celebrated their weddings across the state of California, we could feel the power of our love. In particular, the picture of Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon being married by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom after 55 years of faithful partnership brings tears to the eyes. This scene was replicated nearly 18,000 times between June and November.

And then came the gut-wrenching realization that religion is still used as a weapon against us and racism is alive and well in our midst as Prop. 8 was passed and the early analysis came in. This

was echoed in Florida and Arizona, where our community's one victory on a ballot initiative involving marriage was overturned. And, perhaps one of the most difficult to fathom is the bigotry of Arkansas, which victimizes both LGBT people and the children who depend upon the foster and adoptive systems when the people of that state voted overwhelmingly to ban foster and adoption by "unmarried" individuals.

In the religious organizing world, we rejoiced as the Presbyterian General Assembly shifted its policy on ordination of same-gender-loving pastors. We await with hope the ratification of this change by a majority of presbyteries in 2009. And we give thanks that anti-transgender policies were rejected by the United Methodist General Conference.

There are many more pieces upon which to reflect -- stories of individual journeys toward coming out, stories of gay-and-straight alliances organizing, stories of individual congregations going through a welcoming and affirming process and joining with the now 3,200 such congregations across this country.

In all of it, the lessons of this season -- Bodhi Day and Solstice and Christmas and Eid al Adha and Hanukkah and Kwanzaa -- remind us that individual courage and collective action that is rooted in hope, love and justice do change the world. It may take time. We will experience setbacks and failure and despairing times. But, that which we name as sacred and holy is guiding and leading and beckoning this fabulous and broken world toward greater wholeness and wider justice.

About the Author: The Rev. Rebecca Voelkel is the Institute for Welcoming Resources and faith work director for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.