

## Minister vows to continue same-sex ceremonies

By J. Clyde Wills  
Special Correspondent

When the Rev. Marion Visel of Westport visited the quiet hamlet of New Paltz, N.Y., last Saturday, it wasn't for the little town's natural setting, its cultural offerings or university.

It was for another thing for which New Paltz — nestled between the Shawangunk Mountains and the Hudson River about 90 miles north of New York City — has become known: A willingness to perform same-sex marriages.

Visel, a Unitarian Universal-

ist minister, performed 11 marriages during her visit to New Paltz.

They were not the mass weddings seen in San Francisco, she said — some weddings took as long as 90 minutes, with an exchanging of vows and often an exchange of rings.

"It was just wedding," she said. "The feeling was very up and celebratory."

A community minister from the Unitarian Church in Westport, Visel traveled to New Paltz to support fellow ministers Kay

Please see **MINISTER**, Page A4

## Minister

Continued from Page A1

Greenleaf and Dawn Sangrey, and those wishing to marry.

"I would not hesitate to go back and perform same-sex marriages again," said Visel, 54, a Hamden resident.

Greenleaf and Sangrey have since been charged with solemnizing a marriage without a license, and could face fines and jail time. Visel so far has not been charged.

"But I anticipate being charged," she said.

Last month, in response to the thousands of same-sex marriages performed by San Francisco Mayor Gavin Newsom, New Paltz Mayor Jason West followed suit. West also has been charged.

Visel knew there was a legal danger before she left for New Paltz. When she got there, each minister was presented with a letter from the district attorney's office informing them of their rights and the law.

"It was a suggestion that we not proceed because we would be in violation of the law," she said.

Performing same-sex marriages is nothing new for Unitarian Universalist ministers, who have conducted such marriage ceremonies for 35 years. The re-

ligious ceremonies are not legally binding.

"This has been a deep and committed part of our faith tradition for several decades," said Janet Hayes, information officer for the Unitarian Universalist Association.

What makes the marriages in New Paltz different, Visel said, is the minister signed an affidavit of marriage that was notarized in lieu of a marriage license.

"We were very explicit with the authorities that it was our intention that these marriages were civil," she said.

The authorities in New Paltz were respectful, Visel said, and made it clear the violation was because the marriages were civil, not religious.

"It's an issue of justice," she said. "I believe that all of the couples that I married last Saturday have been couples for 10 years."

The charges were the result of a clarifying opinion on New York law issued earlier this month by state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer. New York law does not

permit same-sex unions, Spitzer said, but it does protect same-sex couples who are married in other states.

In Connecticut, Westport First Selectwoman Diane Farrell has asked state Attorney General Richard Blumenthal to clarify state law regarding same-sex marriage. Blumenthal has said he will issue an opinion by early April.

"I think it is important to wait to hear from the attorney general," Farrell said.

As a justice of the peace, Farrell said she is prepared to perform same-sex weddings if they become legal. It is a matter of what the law provides, she said.

"I think that equal rights are entitled to every American," she said.

The Unitarian Universalist Association still is deciding what to do about the charges against Greenleaf and Sangrey, Hayes said.

Laws governing same-sex unions vary from state to state and the association is dealing with a few of them, she said.

"It's all unfolding so quickly that we are not sure what to do and when," Hayes said.

For Anne Stanback, president of the Connecticut chapter of Love Makes A Family, a statewide coalition advocating for the legalization of same-sex marriage, pressing charges against ministers is "appalling."

"It shows there is a lot of confusion about this issue," Stanback said.

Despite the threat of prosecution, marriages have not stopped in New Paltz, Visel said, and other ministers are ready to go. Right now, the only denomination conducting the marriages is Unitarian Universalist, but she thinks other religious leaders will come forward.

Visel said she'll return.

"We plan on being there this Saturday and the Saturday after that and the Saturday after that," she said.

Such social action is driven, in part, by President Bush's Defense of Marriage Amendment, a proposed constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage. That added flame to the fire, Visel said, and it is just a matter of time until marriage laws are changed.

"I didn't feel that I was breaking the law, but I was healing an injustice," she said.

*"... I was healing an injustice."*

**The Rev. Marion Visel**  
*On performing same-sex marriages*