



SECTIONS

## Article Archives

« "Warrior Dance" | Main | Sunday, March 14, 2004 »

**MARCH 13, 2004**

### Police Cite Westport Minister in New Paltz Same-Sex Marriage Ceremonies

A minister from Westport's Unitarian Church was among clergy cited by police today for performing same-sex marriage ceremonies in New Paltz, N.Y., according to Sunday's New York Times

It said the Rev. Marion B. Visel was one of a number of Unitarian ministers performing the ceremonies under the watchful eyes of 18 police officers.

She and the others received warning letters from the local district attorney.

"I must have officiated at 50 weddings, but never have the police been involved," the newspaper quoted Visel as saying.

"The fines and jail I may face are not as important as the justice brought about by marrying these loving couples."

The Times said as about 25 couples prepared to be married, the New Paltz police chief, Raymond K. Zappone, delivered warning letters to the clergywomen from the Ulster County district attorney, Donald A. Williams.

The letters were similar to one delivered to New Paltz Mayor Jason West several days before he received a criminal summons for performing same-sex marriages.

They warned that a member of the clergy who solemnized an unlicensed marriage might be charged with a misdemeanor.

West, 26, was charged with 19 counts of a criminal misdemeanor for solemnizing unlicensed marriages and was served with an injunction, which he has obeyed, to stop conducting the ceremonies.

In his place, an ad hoc group of residents and clergy who call themselves the New Paltz Equality Initiative have set to the task of organizing weekly marriage ceremonies along the banks of the Wallkill River.

Today, 25 lesbian and gay couples waited in a muddy patch behind a wire arbor until called forward by a master of ceremonies to exchange vows on wooden stages at opposite ends of a small field.

The ceremony attracted about 250 people from several states for an event that combined the righteousness of a civil rights campaign with the tears of a wedding, the newspaper said.

The legality of the marriages in New Paltz will likely be determined by the courts, and those officiating - all of them Unitarian clergywomen - may face the same misdemeanor charges as the mayor, according to the Times.

The Westport Unitarian Church Web site said Visel graduated from Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, Calif., in 1998 with a Master in Divinity.

She was ordained by the Westport congregation and serves it as an endorsed community minister. She is also a chaplain with Connecticut Hospice, working out of their home care office in Norwalk, it said.



Rev. Marion Visel  
File photo

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