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Margaret Cruikshank

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# Free-speech policy needs revising

By Margaret Cruikshank

My article is prompted by the display of anti-gay material by a Christian sect in the Memorial Union March 24 and 25. Over the tables were two large banners asking, "What is Wrong with Homosexuality?" and, "What is Wrong with Fornication?"

Members of Wilde-Stein responded quickly and creatively with a display of their own, and the next day they demonstrated. But no gay or lesbian or bisexual student at the University of Maine should ever be insulted or demeaned by such a public display of bigotry.

The First Amendment probably allows outsiders to pass out leaflets advocating any position they choose, or nearly any position, but I do not believe that we have to put up with a banner whose message verges on hate speech.

Therefore, I call on the administration to clarify its policy on renting tables in the Union to outside groups. May anyone come in with any message? Where do we draw the line?

We would not allow a banner insulting feminists, Hispanics, blacks or Native Americans. So when we allow a slur against gay

men and lesbians, we are suggesting that they do not deserve the same kind of respect readily given to other minority groups.

Ironically, the offensive banner appeared on campus on the same day the Bangor Daily News ran an article about UMaine's attempts to address diversity issues more effectively. If outsiders want to put homophobic banners in the student union, just say no.

The invasion of our campus by the misnamed "Friends of Jesus Christ," who never heard apparently that their friend preached "love thy neighbor," typifies the homophobia that will be documented when the diversity archives at the University of Southern Maine open.

In the pamphlets passed out by the Friends, they repeatedly deny they are gay bashers. Their fore-runners in the 1970s were proud to hate gay people and advocate violence against us. After 25 years of lesbian and gay liberation, opponents know that the gay bashing label is undesirable.

The Friends were upset by a peer education pamphlet written by Amanda Blake titled "Straight Talk About Homosexuality." One of their responses was that "science and medicine and history all testify that homosexuality brings the likelihood of an early death."

This is a dangerous lie. Having survived to the amazing age of 58 as a homosexual, I can assure the Friends that science, medicine and history do not support their contention. Furthermore, even with AIDS – one cause of early death among heterosexuals as well as homosexuals – we find that many people who die of the disease are more than 50 years old.

The Friends go on to complain that it is politically incorrect to speak against homosexuality. If that were true, they'd be kept off campus. The truth is that while organized opposition to homophobia exists in a few liberal campus communities in the United States

and in a few large cities, condemning gay people is still widely accepted across the country. Unfortunately for Maine's reputation as a progressive place, condemnations of gay men, lesbians and bisexuals were so widespread and virulent in February that the gay-rights law was vetoed.

The Friends are wrong, too, when they claim that traditional Christianity has always been opposed to homosexuals. It's true that the Inquisition burned a number of us, but scholars and theologians have found some fascinating examples of acceptance, most notably outlined in John Boswell's book "Christianity, Homosexuality, and Social Tolerance." In February, letters to the editor in the Bangor Daily News urging a "no" vote on the gay-rights referendum were signed by large numbers of Christian ministers.

The Friends' pamphlet says, "We expect that homosexuality will prevail more and more."

Nobody can be sure that the coming years will bring greater acceptance of gay people, fewer bashings and killings, or more laws against discrimination. If the economy collapses, scapegoats will be needed, and many right-wing Christians will be available to fan the flames of hate.

The struggle for gay liberation will be won not in places like San Francisco, Minneapolis, or Provincetown, but in the towns and villages of America, where creating social change is a very daunting task. The Wilde-Stein students are doing their part to bring change. Will our administrators and our faculty do theirs?

*Margaret Cruikshank is a lecturer in women's studies and in social work. She taught one of the first gay and lesbian literature courses at City College of San Francisco beginning in 1982. Her book "The Gay and Lesbian Liberation Movement" won a human rights award in 1993.*