

Whither the Transgender Community? Whither AEGIS?

by Dallas Denny

In the four-part series *Vision 2001: A Gender Odyssey*, which appeared in these pages last year, I took a broad look at the rapidly evolving transgender community, attempting to affix it in time as it was in early- to mid- 1996. It was an ambitious task, and one I have received both accolades and criticisms for attempting. I made some mistakes of fact, and at least one of judgement, as I was overly harsh in my response to a letter from Jane Ellen Fairfax in Issue #6. But overall, I feel pretty good about what I wrote.

In researching the article, I was struck with how very extensive the transgender community has become. The emergence of such a range of services and organizations would have been very difficult to predict — or even to believe possible — ten or so years ago.

I discovered, however, that although much is being done, things tend to happen haphazardly, with no overriding plan or strategy, and with considerable duplication of services at local, state, and national levels. Considering that volunteers are always in short supply and that many of the community's activists — myself included — are battle-scarred and weary, it would behoove the various organizations to share certain duties and responsibilities among themselves, with each group providing certain functions on a nationwide basis. For example, wouldn't it be nice if there were a single national hotline, staffed with volunteers six days a week, which would direct callers to the most appropriate resource? Wouldn't it be great if there were a central source for quality educational literature about crossdressing and transsexualism? Wouldn't it be wonderful for one organization to take the initiative in providing help to transpersons who face discrimination at work — not by just writing about job discrimination, but by standing shoulder-to-shoulder with those discriminated against, helping them in their individual fights? (Of course, steps are being made in this direction. For instance, IFGE, AEGIS, Renaissance, and

Transgender Forum (an internet resource) cooperate in keeping a list of active support groups; this makes for a much more definitive and up-to-date listing than would any of these groups acting by themselves. More ambitious cooperative endeavors, however, remain in the community's future.

Although it's wonderful there's so much going on, I have to wonder if perhaps we have too many organizations. The trans community is made of a small number of people in comparison to other minority communities. Perhaps it would be capable of adequately funding one or two national organizations — but not as many as we currently have. As things stand, most of the national organizations are under-funded and under-staffed. Who knows how long they will be able to last? Certainly not indefinitely. ICTLEP has announced that due to lack of community support, this year's conference may be the last; the other organizations continue to look, often unsuccessfully, for funds.

In June, at the 2nd International Congress on Sex and Gender Issues, there occurred what may prove to be a historic meeting. Over dinner, principals from AEGIS, IFGE, and Renaissance Education Association agreed that the Executive Directors of each of the three will approach their respective Boards for permission to appoint two people to form a committee to prepare a plan for merger of the three organizations into a single, new organization.

Although this was but a tiny step, and may come to naught, it is significant that the three organizations would consider this. It shows a willingness to put aside egos and private agendas for the greater good of the community.

And what if the merger were to actually happen? Think how much more efficiently the community's many needs could be addressed by a new organization with the combined resources and expertise of the three organizations! And consider: there would be but one organization to join, one membership application, one fee.

The growth of the transgender community, the changes in the ways we view ourselves, demand that our organizations evolve to meet today's needs. It's no longer possible for a volunteer-based agency to serve the many persons coming out about their transgender issues, or of persons in transition, or of helping professionals. We need professional organizations with paid staff.

As a community, we are moving away from the images of ourselves we once held, and exploring new ground. We are not just crossdressers and transsexuals; we are transgendered. We don't take for granted, as we once did, that there is something wrong with us. Increasingly, we point our collective finger at a screwed-up society. Although the trans community was founded on identity politics, the wisdom of this has come into question. Perhaps, as Jessica Xavier suggested in her article *So You Want to Be in Politics*, (*AEGIS News*, #7), we need to play identity politics in the same way as has the gay and lesbian community. Perhaps, as Callan Williams has suggested (*Chrysalis*, Volume 2, No. 4), we need to avoid identity politics. We do, however, have much to learn from the media-savvy and relatively wealthy gay and lesbian political machine. In either case, our organizations must reach a level of efficiency and professionalism we have hereto not achieved.

All of this works around to why I wrote *Vision 2001*. Much has changed since 1991, the year I founded AEGIS. For the past several years, I have been struggling with how AEGIS should adapt to the many changes in the transgender community, and wondering how AEGIS could grow into an organization capable of addressing in an organized fashion the needs of increasing numbers of transsexual and transgendered persons. Certainly I think AEGIS has done a good job, but there is *so* much left undone. Perhaps the potential merger is just the thing. In fact, I am quite certain that such a merger would be good for the community and for AEGIS.