

A more defined welcome mat

Toni Lambert
September 03, 2008

In its search for a new full-time permanent pastor, the task force at the 82-year-old Community United Church of Christ in St. Paul Park ran into an unexpected hitch.

“During our search, which began in early spring, we found a number of the candidates were gay or lesbian,” said Edie Seefeldt, chair of the task force.

Seefeldt said task force members were willing to consider a gay or lesbian, and a lesbian woman was offered the position.

“The candidate thought about it, but finally said she couldn’t accept because Community United wasn’t officially ONA — Open and Affirming to the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Community,” Seefeldt said. “That made us stop and think. We finally put our search on hold and began to study whether the church wanted to be officially ONA.”

The entire congregation will vote on the question Nov. 16, but not before the task force has opened discussion at three special events.

“We will all be asking for Divine guidance when it comes time to make a decision that has been known to cause a rift in many a church,” Seefeldt said. She favors the move because “it serves as an assurance to members of the gay community that we have voted positively to accept and welcome them into our church family.

“I think the gay community is marginalized and I don’t think it’s a Christian attitude,” she said.

The congregation at Community — about 200 — knows what the task force is doing, but hasn’t participated much, according to Seefeldt. She’s hoping for a change in that participation level as the topic is discussed during the next two months.

On Sunday, Sept. 14, at 10:30 a.m., Rev. Rebecca Voelkel will lead worship. Voelkel is program director of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force’s Institute for Welcoming Resources.

Also on Sept. 14, the Task Force will open a display of 50 stoles from the Shower of Stoles, a collection of liturgical stoles representing the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people of faith. The stoles will remain on display at the church through Sunday, Oct. 19. It will be open to the public during regular worship hours or by special request.

The 10:30 a.m. worship service on Sunday, Oct. 19, will include a panel discussion of five or more people who are involved with the GLBT community. Among them will be Gigi Nauer, daughter of Joe and Priscilla Nauer of St. Paul Park, and her partner, the Rev. Robin Raudabaugh, pastor of Pilgrims United Church of Christ of Maple Grove, and Leslie Amundson, the St. Paul Park church’s consultant from the United Church of Christ Coalition for GLBT Concerns.

Seefeldt said the public is welcome to attend all the events.

Community United Church of Christ is located at the corner of Pullman and Summit avenues in St. Paul Park. For details, call the church office at (651) 459-2543.

If you go

The Shower of Stoles is a collection of over 1,000 liturgical stoles and other sacred items representing the lives of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people of faith.

These religious leaders have served in 32 denominations and faith traditions, in six countries, and on three continents. Each stole contains the story of a GLBT person who is active in the life and leadership of their faith community in some way: minister, elder, deacon, teacher, missionary, musician, administrator or active layperson.

This extraordinary collection celebrates the gifts of GLBT persons who serve God in countless ways, while also lifting up those who have been excluded from service because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The vast majority of the stoles have been sent in by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people themselves. Some have been sent by families or friends to honor a GLBT loved one. About one third of all the stoles are donated anonymously; in fact over three-quarters of the stoles donated specifically by clergy and other full-time church professionals are done so anonymously.

In some cases, a church has sent a stole inscribed only with the church's name, or with the names of both gay and straight members, to honor those in that particular congregation who must remain anonymous. All of the stoles, named or anonymous, contain stories, prayers, or other messages.

— Taken from the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, www.welcomingresources.org.