

PIONEER PRESS

Churches put welcome to gays in writing

Certification is controversial but also a 'wonderful conversation'

By Bob Shaw
09/21/2008

The small church was proud of being open to all people — including homosexuals.

But, unfortunately, that wasn't enough. When it tried to hire a lesbian to be pastor of the church last summer, it discovered it needed to prove its openness.

The church is pursuing official certification that it is welcoming to gays, lesbians and bisexual and transgendered people.

"We have some people who are not happy" about seeking a third party's approval, said Edie Seefeldt, chair of a task force at Community United Church of Christ in St. Paul Park.

If it receives the designation, the 200-member congregation will be hopping onto a pink-triangle bandwagon.

Interest in the GLBT certification is soaring — with the number of America's certified churches tripling in two years to about 3,100.

For the St. Paul Park church, the "Open and Affirming" designation would be granted by officials of the United Church of Christ. **About 20 other denominations have similar programs, according to the Rev. Rebecca Voelkel of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.**

They include Reconciled in Christ for Lutherans, Reconciling Ministries for the United Methodist Church and the More Light Presbyterians.

Not every church is thrilled by the trend.

"According to Scripture, we are all equal in the sight of God. Why do we have to go beyond that?" said the Rev. Timothy Johnson, director of the Minnesota Church Ministries Association.

The group's roughly 100 member churches, most of which are conservative, he said, generally believe "homosexuality is something to be avoided, not encouraged." He said the designations were a "political move."

If a seal of approval is needed to prove a church accepts gays, he said, why not a separate program for other minorities?

"How far do you want to push this?" Johnson said.

A WELCOMING SIGN

Supporters say the certifications are needed because of anti-gay church history and the depth of homophobia.

"Given how much pain and abuse they have experienced at the hands of the church, this is an extremely important piece of the puzzle," Voelkel said.

"Most churches say everyone is welcome. But that comes with caveats," said Phil Soucy, a spokesman for Lutherans Concerned, which works for inclusion of homosexuals in church life.

"Tales abound of (GLBT) people going to a church, being found out and being asked to leave," he said.

Voelkel compared a church's empty welcome for gays to a claim of being open to people with disabilities — meaningless without ramps or elevators for wheelchairs.

The certification programs generally require a church to hold a series of meetings to discuss GLBT issues. The churches often write a proclamation affirming their GLBT-supporting stance — which might lump in language supporting other groups, including racial minorities or people with mental or physical disabilities.

Then, the centralized church office, or a gay-affirming subgroup, approves the designation.

"It's a way for people who don't necessarily know a congregation to know that the congregation has done its work," Voelkel said. "It can say it is welcoming, and say that honestly."

COUNTERING ANTI-GAY RHETORIC

In St. Peter, Minn., First Lutheran Church got its designation in May.

"We did get a little pushback," said Jan Jensen, a member of the church's task force on the issue.

Some members worried the certification might open a door to gay marriage or ordination of gay pastors with partners, she said.

But when it was over, she said, the church was made stronger by the self-examination. "A lot of wonderful conversation happened," Jensen said.

Salem English Lutheran Church in Minneapolis, which has a gay pastor, earned the designation in 2005.

Church member Paul Livdahl recalls that at the time, there was one primary objection: "Does this mean we will become a gay church?"

His answer was: "No. But we are welcoming to everyone. This is a formal way of welcoming them."

The certification trend is a reaction against the rise of fundamentalist evangelical churches, said Paul Wharton, Salem church council president.

He said not all fundamentalist churches spout anti-gay rhetoric, but "the evangelical movement has gotten a lot of attention for saying that, and I want people to know they don't speak for the whole Christian community."

"We are pushing back. We are willing to stand up and say, 'This is not our understanding of Christ's teachings.' "

Voelkel agreed. "You have to ask: What does the Gospel really mean? That we are supposed to love all people regardless of what we are being told?"

To that argument, traditionalists say: Read the Bible. "There are direct scriptural sanctions against that (GLBT) behavior," said the Minnesota Church Ministries Association's Johnson.

This week, the St. Paul Park church is scrambling to prove — again — that it is GLBT-friendly.

The church is festooned with 50 colorful articles of clothing representing the lives and struggles of GLBT people. **Voelkel, of the Gay and Lesbian Task Force, preached there last week.** The church schedule is packed with meetings building up to the church's "Open and Affirming" vote Nov. 16.

Seefeldt said she has heard from only two members who say they won't vote for it.

But didn't the church already prove itself by offering its top job to a lesbian?

Sarah Stanley, an official for St. Louis Park's Union Congregational United Church of Christ, which earned the designation in 2007, said she was surprised Community United needed to pursue certification.

"We have all had to ask: 'Are we as open as we think we are?' "