

Faith versus lifestyle can create challenges for church members

BY STACIE CARLSON
Special to the Record-Eagle

For many people, religion offers a blueprint on how to approach challenges and live life. But what happens when a person's lifestyle or belief system is at odds with his or her faith?

"Unfortunately, this isn't a new topic," said Rabbi Stacie Bahle of the Congregation Ahavat Shalom in Traverse City. "Modern Jews often are rooted in two worlds, in their identities as Jewish people and also as Americans. That modernity sometimes doesn't mesh easily with the Jewish faith."

The idea of modernity conflicting with faith isn't just restricted to the observance of holy days. It can expand to include conflicts between faith, religion and lifestyles.

"We seek to be a welcoming community and being a downtown church, we make our church available for meetings of all sorts in the life of our community, and this includes supporting and nurturing gay and lesbian people," said Reverend D. Edward Emenheiser, rector at Grace Episcopal Church in Traverse City. "Ours is a church where, as our former president stated, 'There will be no outsiders,' and as our sign during the war said, we are 'a house of prayer for all people.' For us, it's about creating an attitude of acceptance."

Inclusiveness is a common theme throughout houses of faith in northern Michigan. Those who struggle with the relationship between their faith's doctrine and their sexual orientation, stance on abortion, or political identification can usually find a place to worship where they feel secure.

"It is our understanding, based on our interpretation of biblical principles, that Jesus loved people unconditionally," said Peter Semeyn, senior pastor at Faith Reformed Church. "We try to imitate this high level of tolerance, recognizing that we all fall short of God's expectations. This is a difficult path to follow: loving people, but not always what they do; accepting people, but not always finding all that they do acceptable. We do not ask peo-

ple to identify their sexual orientation or moral stances on issues in order to participate in our ministry. When people feel and experience the love and acceptance of Christ, they become open to the moral teachings and standards of the scriptures."

Though acceptance and tolerance are touted in most congregations, some people feel the rift between lifestyle and religion to be too strong to stay in their faith.

"Most Christian people may accept me as a lesbian, but they may see lesbian lovemaking to be a sin," said Konja Klepper of Traverse City. "It makes it difficult to stay in a faith where all aspects of my relationship aren't accepted."

At a core level, many churches address these issues directly

through statements of diversity or prayer.

"We believe that passages in the Bible can be interpreted in different ways," said Reverend Judy Grimes of Unity Church of Traverse City. "We look at the culture and the times, recognizing that all people are children of God, and accepting and appreciating everyone as they are. Lately, we've been doing a lot of services geared toward overcoming prejudice and embracing diversity beyond skin color."

People are often measured by politically driven actions in which others from their faith participate.

"When there's violence in Israel, our synagogue tends to want to talk and study more," said Bahle. "They often don't feel safe talking in the general

community for fear that they will come off as anti-Palestinian or as war mongers. Some of our congregation have expressed that our community is not safe. That has not been my personal experience. I feel that we live in a positive, loving, tolerant community."

The political ramifications of religion and faith were especially strong after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and many religious leaders reached out to northern Michigan's Muslim

population.

"Although there are only about 10 families in our community, we thought it was very important to open our doors and welcome people of Muslim faith into our prayer space after 9-11," added Bahle. "We wanted, and still want, to express that even though our traditions are very different, we remain welcoming, accepting and inclusive of all people."

Stacie Carlson is a local freelance writer.

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Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod





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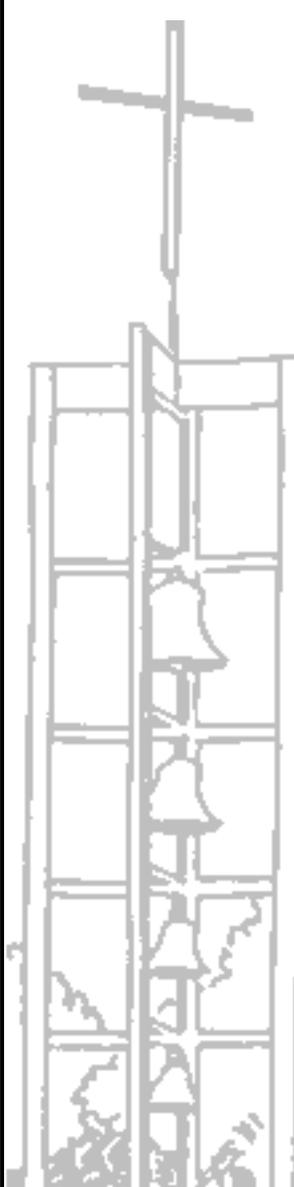
Saturday	4:00 pm
(Summer)	6:00 pm
Sunday	8:00 am
	10:00 am
	12:00 pm

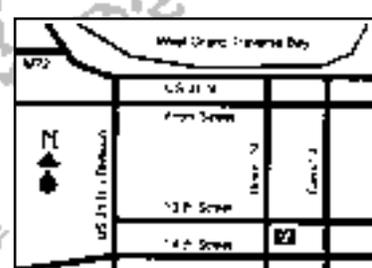
Holy Days

5:30 pm evening before
9:30 am and 5:30 pm
on Holy day

Confessions

Saturdays 5:00 pm





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