

PRCC veering from church policy

By JACKIE ROMAN

When the top policy-making body of the United Methodist Church voted to uphold a prohibition of LGBTQ clergy and same-sex marriage in February, Pound Ridge resident Ebie Wood said she found herself confronting a difficult question: "How could I ever be part of an organization that excluded someone for who they love?"

For millions of other Methodists across the country, the General Conference's 438 to 384 decision to approve the "Traditional Plan" set off similar soul searching.

The approved plan calls for stricter enforcement of rules against same-sex weddings and the ordination of LGBTQ clergy. It is set to take effect in the United States on Jan. 1, 2020.

Several regional bodies of the church, such as the Great Plains, Michigan, and New York Annual Conferences, have since passed their own resolutions denouncing the denomination's conservative stance.

Ms. Wood wondered what her own parish, the UMC affiliated Pound Ridge Community Church, would do in light of the divisive decision.

"I've been going to that church for 75 years and I feel so strongly if a church is to mean something, it must include everyone," Ms. Wood said.

She got her answer when the pastor, the Rev. Jim Van Schaick, convened an all-church meeting June 23 to approve a statement affirming the church is for "all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, age, faith history, economic status, relationship status, physical and mental ability, or education."

"I'm relieved," Ms. Wood said. "There's a time you have to stand up and I'm glad this little church in the town I grew up in is doing the right thing."

'I'm glad this little church in the town I grew up in is doing the right thing.'

— EBIE WOOD, POUND RIDGE COMMUNITY CHURCH MEMBER

Congregants of the 185-year-old Pound Ridge Community Church, part of the historically progressive New York Annual Conference, approved the statement unanimously.

"There are a lot of churches doing what we're doing, going on record," Rev. Jim Van Schaick said. "We have to be equally loud in our opposition."

In the months following the controversial February vote, Mr. Van Schaick said congregants who were "upset, dismayed, and overwhelmingly opposed" to the Traditional Plan approached him. He decided the church should publicly reaffirm the parish as "a place of welcome and inclusion."

"Culturally, for our church and community, gay and lesbian people are just a part of our lives," Mr. Van Schaick said.

Church member Jeanine Long said that's why she was "extremely disappointed" in the results of the General Conference.

"The church here in Pound Ridge is like family," explained Ms. Long. "But following that vote it felt like a dysfunctional family that made me question what the future was going to be."

As a representative on the PRCC Administrative Council, Ms. Long said she felt "it was important to get our message out to the community."

"It's really critical people are aware that we're not judgmental," Ms. Long said. "I don't think the General Conference position is a representation of our

church."

Despite the PRCC's efforts to separate itself from the position of the UMC leadership, some people will still hold doubts about whether or not the church is truly open to everyone.

"We felt ripples all over the church," Mr. Van Schaick said. "We did have people who were regular attendees who are no longer coming."

The pastor said several of them cited the General Conference's decision as a reason for departure. He also said one of the four young adults in this year's confirmation class ultimately decided not to join the church, despite having previously attended for years.

That apprehension did not surprise Mr. Van Schaick, who said he himself found the Traditional Plan "disturbing" in the way it strengthened prohibition of LGBTQ inclusion.

"The most punitive plan was chosen," Mr. Van Schaick said. "My gay and lesbian colleagues in the ministry are devastated. They have an uncertain future."

The new legislation prohibits the ordination of any "self-avowed practicing homosexual" with the explanation that "homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching."

Congregants of PRCC disagree with that limitation in the General Conference's public message, stating they "oppose barriers to ordination for anyone God has called to use their gifts and graces in service to the Gospel."

The plan adopted by the General Conference also includes mandatory penalties for pastors who perform same-sex ceremonies, with a year's suspension for the first offense and termination of conference membership and church credentials for a second offense.

Nonetheless, Mr. Van Schaick said he would not turn away any same-sex couple if they asked for his blessing.

"The Traditional Plan is based on a very narrow definition of human sexuality," Rev. Van Schaick said. "Our theological mission is to step back and see the big message," which he said "was about radical hospitality, love, and acceptance."

According to their unanimously approved public statement, PRCC congregants "believe that human sexuality is a good gift from God, and that God rejoices in the healthy use of this gift in loving relationships amongst all couples, regardless of sex and gender expression."

"Sexuality that objectifies is inappropriate, but appropriate uses are those where sexuality is part of a loving relationship," Mr. Van Schaick explains. "And God doesn't particularly care if it's between a man and a woman."

Although affiliated churches across the country have expressed similar sentiments, the United Methodist Church's highest judicial body, the Judicial Council, stands by the key components of the Traditional Plan.

What this means for the future of the Pound Ridge Community Church is unclear. The United Methodist Church does offer "a gracious exit" for local churches that want to leave the denomination in wake of recent rulings.

"There is a lot of benefit to being in a connected group," Mr. Van Schaick said. "But I think we have to discuss taking action."