

# Putting out the welcome mat

New church community reaches out for diversity

BY RODGER LARSON

The kids at Wy'east Unitarian Universalist Congregation sing a wonderful song called "A Place in the Choir," and the lyrics go like this: "All God's critters got a place in the choir, some sing low, some sing higher."

The adults sing the song, too, but the kids really get into the part where each critter makes its particular noise; the braying and oinking and bellowing and quacking fill the church space. The music is great and the movements are fun, but it is the words themselves that say the most about the Wy'east community and the attitude of its members.

At 4 years old, Wy'east is a new congregation as congregations go. To use a bit of biblical language, in the beginning Wy'east was a dream of eight core individuals who felt the need for a Unitarian Universalist congregation located on the east side of the Willamette River.

During that first year the small group, including a couple of members of the gay and lesbian community, met in homes around dining room tables and dreamed and planned and worked and worked and worked until they went public with a proposal for a new eastside liberal religious community close to downtown Portland.

The fledgling group first rented space from Metropolitan Community Church but soon outgrew that basement. They moved on to share Trinity United Methodist Church in Southeast Portland.

This is the same location where the Rosetown Ramblers dance and where the Portland Lesbian Choir practices. Good company for the open-minded and welcoming Unitarian Universalists. A consulting minister, Tim Jensen, was hired to help build the congregation into a stronger spiritual community.

Enter the Rev. Kit Ketcham. This is one dynamic lady—preaching, singing, laying it on the line and telling it like it is. Wy'east Unitarian Universalist Congregation has grown and now has more than 90 members.

Many exciting and active committees are doing good work. This spring, the Adult Religious Education Program offered an eight-week course, "Weaving the Fabric of Diversity," which looked at the various threads present in our society and how these unique personal qualities can enrich our lives. Ketcham called the class "powerful."

Next year, she is committed to offering "The Welcoming Congregation," a program designed to ensure congregations are warm and open to

gays, lesbians, bi and trans folks. It is really a study program in which all members of the congregation and staff participate. The congregation must meet many standards to be certified "welcoming," a bit like earning merit badges as a Scout.

"I want Wy'east to be on record as a welcoming congregation," Ketcham says. "It's preventive work for the next anti-gay and lesbian ballot initiative. We all have work to do. It takes time. It takes kindness."

These are more than just words. Wy'east has firm plans. The opening workshop for "The Welcoming Congregation" will be held Oct. 6 with the Rev. Keith Kron, an openly gay ordained Unitarian Universalist minister and director of the office of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Concerns of the Unitarian Universalist Association in Boston.

The following day the congregation will celebrate Solidarity Sunday. This all is scheduled to take place the weekend before National Coming Out Day.

One example of the openness already present at Wy'east is the Youth Group unit on sexuality. Leaders invite gay, lesbian, bi and trans members of the congregation to speak with the kids. The openness and sharing between adults and young people is impressive.

When the Oregon Citizens Alliance reared its ugly head with Measure 9, the youth of Wy'east congregation spent evenings at Powell's Books working the phone banks, asking citizens to vote no on the initiative. Six of them volunteered, and one of them brought five of her high school friends along to help.

"Measure 9 would have affected my family," said Paul Trowbridge, a tall, slender member of the youth group. "This was an easy way to do important service to the community. It gave me a sense of doing the right thing."

Trowbridge and other young members of Wy'east also work with the Gay Rights Oregon Youth Group. During a recent Lobby Day in Salem, he met with legislators to let them

The Rev. Kit Ketcham is committed to social action, peace and justice

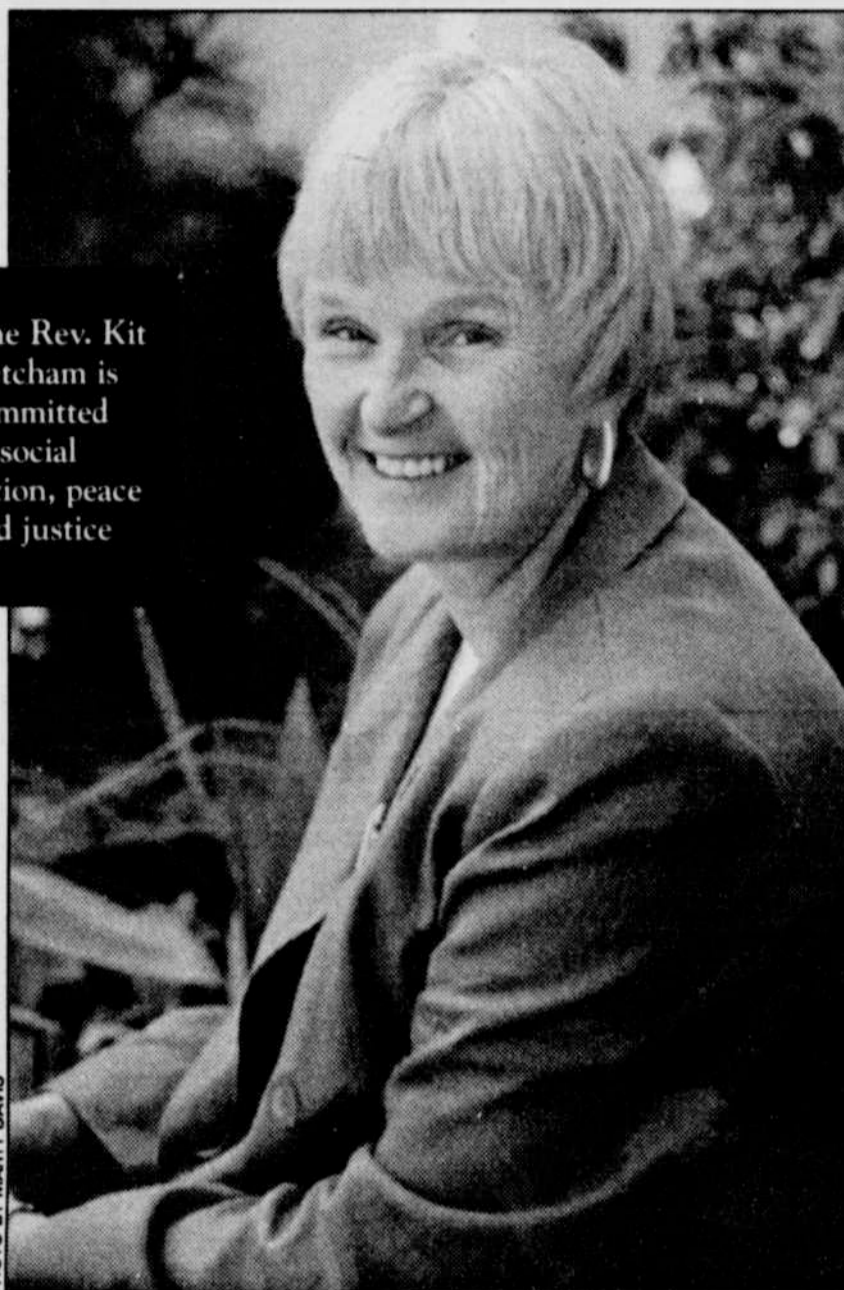


PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

ment to social action, peace and justice. In-home potluck dinners happen three or four times a year. These dinners, called Sharing Suppers, help members get to know one another in more personal ways. Building community is a key objective of the congregation.

Almost every service includes a time for Sharing of Joys and Concerns. Members who wish to talk about a personal event in their lives step forward, light a candle and speak briefly about what is happening.

Congregation activities include overnight trips to Mount Hood, dances, dinners, roller skating, parties, hikes and book discussion groups. But the main focus of the community is its mission to help all members gain peace and spiritual understanding in their lives.

Because music and singing are important parts of the Sunday service at Wy'east, a regular feature is the Family Choir. This intergenerational singing group—ages range from 10 to 70—loves to get the rest of the congregation wired up and singing "A Place in the Choir."

After all God's diverse critters have had their say, the song ends this way: "It's a simple song of living, sung everywhere, by the ox and the fox and the grizzly bear. The grumpy alligator and the hawk above, the sly raccoon and the turtle dove."

This is a whimsical song to be sure, but it reflects the basic principles of the Unitarian Universalists. The denomination has no religious dogma or creed as such. Many members draw their beliefs from Judeo-Christian sources, but a wide range of beliefs are welcome.

There are Christian Unitarian Universalists and Pagan Unitarian Universalists; even atheists are welcome. What unites members is a commitment to support each other in finding a spiritual path.

Unitarian Universalists do operate, however, with seven basic principles. The first of these is to "value the dignity and worth of every human being."

The seventh and last principle is to "recognize and honor the interdependent web of life of which we are a part." No wonder all God's critters have a place in the choir and are singing about it. ■

WY'EAST UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CONGREGATION meets 4 p.m. Sundays at Trinity United Methodist Church, 3915 S.E. Steele St.

RODGER LARSON is a Portland writer interested in a range of arts and culture.

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—the Rev. Kit Ketcham

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