

Gretchen Woods is on her third career in life as minister at Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis.

Her first passion was music; she holds a bachelor's degree in French horn and has sung professionally. She describes her second career as wife and mother.

In 1981 she went to a Jesuit institution to earn a master's degree in religious studies. Eventually she continued on to get a doctorate in systems to better understand congregational dynamics.

Woods and partner, Judy Finholm, never planned to be where they are today. They met while both were married with children and active at the Unitarian Universalist fellowship in Bremerton, Wash.

"When we met I was parish minister and Judy's title was office administrator," Woods says. "She's been there since the beginning of my ministry."

Finholm served on committees that structured Woods' early career in the fellowship. They found they worked well together and became best friends.

Today, their life together seems seamless. They say it all depends on where you focus your energy.

"We spent a lot of years as friends before we were together," Woods says. "We were older, had kids and had lived the straight life. There is a point where it becomes more important to consider how our values fit together, values about children and what's important in our lives. We are really well matched."

Woods and Finholm only struggled with telling their children. Between the two are five biological kids and one foster daughter. Three weeks after they came out, one of Finholm's sons came out to her.

HOLY UNION

Corvallis minister and partner celebrate 10 years together

by Heather Hybarger



The Rev. Gretchen Woods (right) and her partner, Judy Finholm, dish up Make a Connection dinners every month

Finding ways to work together is an important part of the couple's relationship. Woods is a founding member and singer with Confluence, a mixed Gay and Lesbian Association of Chorus group in Salem, and Finholm is the production manager. They both look forward to the car rides to the capital city and the time spent together doing something they enjoy.

Music is what led Woods to the ministry—and

is what keeps her going. "I came to the ministry through music when I realized that what I communicated was more important than how," she says.

For Woods, Confluence keeps her sane. "A minister needs one thing to be involved in that has nothing to do with ministry," Finholm says.

In addition, they look forward every third Thursday to the Make a Connection dinners.

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Corvallis played host to the potlucks for a year and a half, but they outgrew their home and are now a purely social outlet for the city's sexual minorities.

The couple have experienced different versions of community in Bremerton and in Reston, Va., where Woods spent seven years as minister of a Unitarian Universalist fellowship. They say their current hometown is almost completely lacking in a social scene.

"Gay life in Corvallis is mostly focused on a political response to initiatives," Finholm says. "There are no social outlets, no bar, no bookstore, no community."

That is why the dinners and the fellowship itself are important for Corvallis, according to Woods. "It's hard for people coming into town to link up at all," she says.

Woods likes to get the word out about the dinners and the fact that her fellowship is a welcoming congregation, a label given to churches that go through an awareness training regarding queer issues. Unitarian Universalists also have higher percentages of female and sexual minority ministers than other religious affiliations.

Overall, Woods says she and Finholm just enjoy their lives together. The couple celebrated 10 years since their union ceremony Dec. 23.

"We just pretty much live our lives," Woods says. "You don't come out at work; you just be who you are. The way we look at it, why not spend the rest of your life with your best friend?"

UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST FELLOWSHIP OF CORVALLIS, 2945 N.W. Circle Blvd., can be reached at 541-752-5218, uucorv@peak.org or www.peak.org/~uucorv.

HEATHER HYBARGER is a free-lance writer and a supporter of cheese.

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