

northwest Welcoming a New Pastor

MCC installs interim leader during anniversary

by Patricia L. MacAodha

Metropolitan Community Church of Portland celebrated its 31st anniversary Jan. 28 in several ways, the most noticeable being the installation of the Rev. Ron LaRocque as the church's interim pastor. LaRocque will fill the position vacated by Glenna Shepherd, who recently left Portland to serve in a denominational role.

LaRocque, who holds a master of divinity degree from Yale University, will serve the congregation while its members go through the search process to call a new senior pastor to the Portland pulpit. Meanwhile, the new pastor looks forward to working with the local congregation and is enjoying what he considers a pleasant transition. "Both city and church have been very welcoming," he says.

The new pastor was raised in a military family. He was born in Augsburg, Germany, which his family left when he was 9 months old. From ages 4 to 30, he lived in Colorado, growing up at Fort Collins. At age 20, he moved to Denver, which was "a good place to come out."

Raised Presbyterian, he felt a calling to the ministry at the young age of 10. After he came out, he feared his goal would not be allowed. "With my life plans dashed, I had to decide how to answer my call. Being a pastor," he added, "is part of who I am."

He began divinity school at Yale and affiliated with an MCC congregation, both of which are in New Haven, Conn. Graduation in 2003 was followed by ordination into the denomination he now serves in Portland. He met his spouse, Ed Kestler, in 1998.

LaRocque enjoys the excitement and challenge of interim work but recognizes he will ultimately need to "put down roots, because my partner is a professional." In seven years, they have lived in three states. Asked where he would like to sink those roots, LaRocque laughed. "Anyplace warm," he answered. Until that assignment appears, the new pastor said he is happy to be in Portland, even though the city was in the throes of a cold snap when he began his tenure.

The strong points LaRocque brings to his interim ministry are preaching and administration. He enjoys "helping congregations move into life abundance," which includes strengthening the administrative structure and focusing on "who the church understands itself to be." He looks to this process as a means of guidance to set the groundwork preceding the congregation's upcoming pastoral search.

LaRocque quickly learned about and became involved with related groups outside MCC Portland. He is especially enjoying contacts in the multifaith Community of Welcoming Congregations, observing the ministry as going "beyond walls, combating all sorts of oppression." He stresses that MCC, in Portland and as a denomination, is "not just for queer people but for all who are disempowered."

He sees an empowered laity as the key to ministry. "MCC churches are pioneers in doing things that had never been done before—a prophetic world church," he said.



The Rev. Ron LaRocque has found Portland to be a supportive city.

Recognizing that earlier changes in the church's denominational structure have not been comfortable with many of its members, he values the strength and competence of Portland's laity. He also emphasizes what he believes is a positive movement of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches in being "rooted, not in place, but in relationships."

Pre-warned about Oregon's reputation for being "unchurched," he was impressed to find that the area and its people are strongly spiritual in nature. "Just because you don't go to church," he observed, "doesn't mean you don't have a connection with the divine."

"Our journeys," he said, "interconnect with each other." He anticipates interacting with practitioners of a variety of spiritual traditions. The study of theological diversity he has experienced has left him open to liaison with a variety of spiritual believers. Diversity expresses itself Sunday at the Portland church. LaRocque calls it "a day of many costumes."

He begins with a suit and tie for the early service, changes to more formal vestments for the later morning service and goes home to lounge in sweats for a part of the afternoon before changing into jeans and a T-shirt for the Sunday evening Elevation service, which draws a younger crowd of churchgoers. LaRocque enjoys them all.

What does MCC Portland's new pastor do when he isn't directly involved in ministry? First, he heads for his kitchen. "Cooking is my sanctuary," he said. "I find it peaceful to get into the kitchen." Other interests including an appetite for reading and visiting. He enjoys gardening and is learning about gardening options while living in an apartment. He enjoys going for walks and, he says with a grin, "There's always shopping." 10

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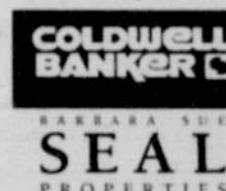
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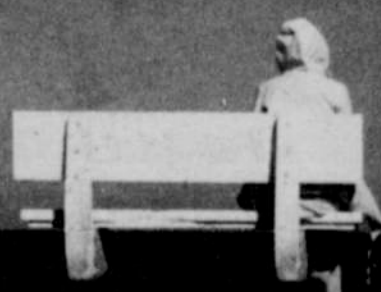
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