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Pastor embraces challenge to grow congregation

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Logan Square church is surviving, growing under leadership of openly gay minister

By Dawn Reiss | Special to the Tribune
March 4, 2009

Rev. Erik Christensen clutches a 64-ounce Diet Coke while a parishioner fixes a rusty slop sink—it's a double Big Gulp kind of day for the pastor of [St. Luke's Lutheran Church](#) of Logan Square. The minister knows that what his century-old church with its neo-Gothic flying buttresses really needs is tuck-pointing. This is just one of many obstacles Christensen and the congregation have faced. Both have been told by Lutheran church administrators they shouldn't exist: Christensen, 35, because he is an openly gay minister, and the congregation because membership had dwindled to about a dozen.

But over the last two years, Christensen has nearly tripled the congregation. And the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the country's largest Lutheran denomination, announced last month it is considering allowing gays and lesbians in committed relationships to serve as clergy members.

John Brooks, spokesman for the Chicago-based Lutheran church group, said that if gays are allowed to be clergy it will likely be at the discretion of each church. Christensen said he appreciates that the group is showing flexibility. "It's about creating a policy to reflect what is already happening for years in a fairly unspoken way," he said.

But his main focus is on continuing to grow St. Luke's, where the threat of closing still looms.



Some of Christensen's methods can seem non-traditional. While he tries to reach people from the pulpit, he also posts his sermons on [Facebook](#) and it's not unusual to find him on the dance floor of a club. His congregation members say they appreciate his trying to blend

tradition with liberal thinking.

Libby Ahearn, 24, said that's why she and husband Brian Gilmore, 23, joined St. Luke's more than a year ago after a long search.

"We were getting desperate to find a church," said Gilmore. "We went to five churches, even as far as away as Lincoln Park, and couldn't find any one we liked. But then we found St. Luke's and Erik."

The couple liked the small, friendly congregation and Christensen's down-to-earth sermons.

"He always seems to tailor his message to our needs," and to the neighborhood, said Ahearn, who now serves as the Sunday school teacher, the first the church has had in many years.

St. Luke's path has been anything but traditional for a long time. After swelling to 800 members in its heyday in the 1950s and '60s, it declined as the neighborhood changed and families moved away. Before Christensen, the last full-time pastor left in 1991 and the church limped along with only 10 to 12 parishioners regularly attending services.

By June 2001, the church council recommended St. Luke's close. But the remaining stalwarts were adamant that it stay open.

"We virtually had no kids, but there was a core group of us that were very stubborn and wanted to give it one last chance," says Judi Keippel, 64.

They sold the parsonage in 2004 and used \$390,000 from that sale as seed money to redevelop the church. They put on a new roof, installed a boiler and began searching for a full-time pastor.

After years of searching unsuccessfully to find a pastor through traditional methods, Keippel noticed a mailing advertising pastors from [Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries](#), which helps ordain and place ministers regardless of sexual orientation.

"I wouldn't be honest if I didn't say a few old-time members don't care for the idea of hiring an openly gay pastor," Keippel said. "But most are accepting and like Erik's enthusiasm, energy and ability to organize and his outreach to the community. His spiritual gifts are phenomenal, and he really seems able to relate to people."

"Besides, we've always been known as the church that never really follows directions," Keippel's husband, Bill, said.

Advertisement for "The Flower Garden Show" featuring "Returning to Navy Pier!" and dates "March 7-15, 2009". The ad includes logos for "BELGIUM" and "SWITZER" and mentions "as seed money to redevelop the church" in the background.



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