

PASTOR

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here differ, largely due to a changing political environment that in recent years has become more accepting of those identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and/or queer.

"The reality is within the church there has always been LGBTQ pastors," Larson said. "Sometimes they led secretively closeted lives. It's just a different perspective where a church makes the conscious choice to call someone like us."

Other churches in the community here are inclusive of LGBTQ people, including Fargo's St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, which recently installed a stained glass window in honor of the LGBTQ community. St.

Stephen's also hosts Pride Festival events and participates in the annual Fargo-Moorhead Pride parade.

Janet Van Amburg, who has been attending First Presbyterian for 48 years along with her husband, Gerald, served on the nominating committee that selected Drake to lead the Moorhead church.

"I know that there were a few members that were anxious at first, but as they have come to know Pastor Robert Drake, they are very comfortable with him," she said. "He certainly fits everything the committee was looking for. When I leave Sunday morning, I just feel refreshed and renewed."

As a former high school math teacher, Van Amburg said she had students who struggled with their sexual orientation, but she has always believed each

person "is God's creation, and God said his creation is beautiful."

Erik Swee, another longtime member, said Drake's sexual orientation is a "non-issue," and he's pleased with the pastor's outgoingness and ability to preach.

"In our society, we've made great strides," Swee said. "I've always considered our congregation as being relatively progressive. ... I'm glad he was the one called here."

Drake agrees with Swee's take.

"The groundwork had been prepared in this congregation long before my biography appeared in the church newsletter," said Drake, who led his first service here two months ago. "I do not see myself as ministering to just gay people. I see myself ministering to anyone who is a member

of this church and Fargo-Moorhead community."

First Presbyterian, like St. Mark's, is on the forefront of social justice efforts advocating for refugees and those who are homeless. In 1991, St. Mark's voted to be Reconciling in Christ, a Lutheran program for congregations welcoming LGBTQ people.

The ELCA changed its policies in 2009 to allow the ordination of LGBTQ pastors, and that's around the time when Larson decided to pursue the pulpit.

But he first attended St. Paul Lutheran Seminary about 30 years before that, and said that's when he started realizing he was gay. He didn't complete ordination then, saying he feared he couldn't live an "authentic life" with a partner he loved.

"Back then, if I

would've come out in seminary, I would've been kicked out," Larson said. "So it's changed tremendously since then."

Drake, who grew up in Grand Rapids, Minn., came out as gay while in college at the University of Minnesota Duluth. When he decided in 2014 to attend Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey, the Presbyterian Church had already voted three years prior to allow the ordination of gay pastors.

In seminary, Drake said he and his husband weren't the only gay couple, and they experienced the same welcome they do here. After his ordination last year, he applied

for pastor openings throughout northern Minnesota, but he said a lot of churches weren't ready for a gay pastor.

Despite policy changes, denominations still leave the decision up to the church on who leads the congregation.

"The strength of that is no one is forced," Drake said.

"I think it's great that some churches are finding ways to welcome people," Larson said. "It's a gradual change so you have churches across the spectrum of acceptance. And I like to think congregations like ours can be role models for other churches."

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