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## Welcoming church is rector's legacy

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MORRISTOWN -- The Rev. Phillip Wilson remembers the Church of the Redeemer being a "pretty depressing place" when he arrived to become its rector in 1987.

"It seemed out of energy and it was lacking a sense of purpose," he said of the Episcopal church.

Then something bad happened but something good came out of it: Eric Johnson, the son of two congregants, contracted AIDS.

Wilson said he started wondering; "Is this place going to be safe for him to come to? That became the defining question."

And, from that point on, the Church of the Redeemer became a refuge for all kinds of people: homosexuals, transgenders, AIDS patients, minorities, women.

Eric Johnson, the son of Bill and Ann Johnson, died of the disease on June 6, 1990, at the age of 32. After that, Wilson and members of the congregation sought to provide a facility to house people suffering from the disease. In 1991, an AIDS walkathon took place to begin raising funds for the creation of The Eric Johnson House. In 1994, it opened in the converted Redeemer rectory, taking in its first three residents that October.

Meanwhile, the size of the congregation increased and the church services became more lively, with each service stressing the need to have a community of individuals living harmoniously while looking out for one another.

Now, after 22 years, Wilson, at the age of 66, said it is time to try different things at a new home in Putney, Vt.

While he isn't sure what the future holds for him, he wants to continue serving, doing God's work, in some way.

Wilson said he wants to try other things, "while I'm still able to do it."

The Rev. Neil Talboom, of the Morristown United Methodist Church, said Wilson is "tremendously dedicated to his congregation" and has always pushed for having churches pay closer attention to helping the poor and the marginalized. He said Wilson was instrumental in getting the Community Soup Kitchen set up on Redeemer's campus several years ago.

"The idea that his church is open to everyone has helped other congregations as well," Talboom said. "He will be missed."

The Rev. C. Melissa Hall will serve as interim pastor of Redeemer.

While many of the congregants are homosexual, Wilson said it would be misleading to label Church of the Redeemer as "a gay church."

Redeemer is a "destination church," attended by people who would not normally attend church, according to Wilson, who said people come to Redeemer to find sanctuary, literally and figuratively. Some come from as far away as Easton, Pa., to attend Sunday services, he said.

Having had only about 40 people attending regularly on Sundays in the late 1980s, the church now has between 120 and 170 in attendance on any given Sunday.

One couple introduced to the church by Wilson were George Jordan and Peter Arnie. Jordan said he and his partner have been attending Redeemer since 1990, after he met Wilson at an AIDS Buddy program in Dover.

"Neither one of us went to church for a long time, but this (Redeemer) is a very different place," he said. Jordan said he will especially miss Wilson's sense of inclusiveness, and how he's made Redeemer a welcoming place.

"It's been a fabulous experience," he said. "It has brought spirituality into our lives."

Wilson conducted a "blessing of the union" between he and Arnie in June 1991, Jordan said, adding that he considers Wilson a close friend.

"I'm going to miss him desperately, not only as my minister but as my confidante," Jordan said. "But we will remain friends."

Another congregant, Anne Marie Mckibbon, 46, of Morristown, said Wilson's dynamic personality helped bring life to his sermons.

"He is inspiring, motivating, and is able to draw people to share their stories," she said. "In that way, we have become a community. He has a good balance of being serious and having a lighter side. He will be missed dearly."

Wilson said he has tried to make the church a reflection of what he believes true Christianity to be. A sign enclosed in a glass case on the church's front lawn around 1990 sums that up.

The sign reads "We Are One Family" and then lists the different types of individuals who are welcome to come by: male, female, white, black, senior, child, gay, straight, infant, liberal, dreamer, Christian, non-Christian, questioning, partnered, single, transgendered, in recovery, searching, young, conservative, nun.

Wilson said he hopes the church remains a force in debunking stereotypes, inviting those who may find most churches too conservative for their liking, and continues to spread love and help, as Jesus did.

One of the most visible signs of inclusiveness, he said, is in the sanctuary. There, a visitor will notice a picture of Jesus wearing an AIDS ribbon on the left side of his chest. There are also gay liberation and black liberation flags in the back.

And, there are some 15 banners hanging, each one reading "Peace" in a different language.

One of Wilson's proudest moments was seeing how quickly money was raised by the congregation to pay for a new water system for an orphanage in Cameroon that Redeemer has had a relationship with. The church needed to raise \$40,000 to purchase the system. About \$60,000 was donated.

Wilson always believed one's faith is based more on "how you act than what you believe." He believes the church's most important accomplishment was getting nontraditional families to attend services.

Families come in every shape and size. We refuse to limit the definition of family," he said. "A family is not necessarily a mom, a dad, two kids and a station wagon."