



## **The Story of Straight Ally Pastor Ginny Miles of Penns Park United Methodist Church in Bucks County**

The Administrative Council at Penns Park United Methodist Church decided to take part in a sixteen-month redevelopment program for churches that were in decline. The program began in February 2005, and six members of the congregation took part in it with me. Early in the program we were told to look within a two- to four-mile radius of the church to determine who were the “lost,” meaning who did not know Jesus. One of the members, who had been friends with a gay couple for years, suggested that we look at ministering to the gay community since we are about six miles south of New Hope. We redefined “lost” to mean those who had been alienated from the Church and from God because of the way they had been treated and the way scripture had been used in a negative way against the members of the LGBT community. It was decided that we would become an “open and affirming” church.

*The Courier Times* featured an article in the Thanksgiving Day edition in the Focus on Newtown about the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of Penns Park UMC in which it was stated that we had made the decision to be an open and affirming church. That Sunday, a woman attended with her parents. During the service as we were sharing the peace, she threw her arms around me sobbing and said, “Thank you for bringing me back to God.” It was a very powerful moment.

For the next few months we struggled to find a way to invite people in to the church and to find a way to reach out to the LGBT community. Finally, I decided to invite a few people – gays, lesbians and straights

– to a meeting at The Raven to look at ways to reach out. One way that was suggested was to start a PFLAG chapter. PFLAG Bucks County has been started in cooperation with folks working with Planned Parenthood and I serve as the vice president. We would like to have a second monthly meeting so that folks have a choice of meeting times and places. We continued to meet at The Raven once or twice a month to plan until The Raven closed in May. Our attempts to start a faith discussion group didn't quite get off the ground, and we are pursuing other ways to get people involved.

I have taken part in a commitment to love ceremony twice in 2007 and once in 2008. There is another ceremony scheduled for October 2008. These occur at Ferry Landing Park in New Hope and are planned by Herb Millman. The church has been at the vendor sale the last two years, and this year we were in the parade during the New Hope Celebrates. We have started potluck suppers on the fourth Sunday of the month at the Church at 6pm and we fly a gay pride flag from the front of the church. The flags have been taken several times which have resulted in press and TV coverage. I have had the opportunity to write articles for the *Courier Times* that hopefully have been seen as advocating for the rights of LGBT individuals. My son has had coworkers comment on the newspaper articles. I continue to talk about my involvement in the gay community at every opportunity, and I have worked hard to be known and to build trust. We have a number of folks who take part in the ministries of our congregation even though they are not members of our church and may not be members of any church and I am grateful for their involvement and am blessed.

Why am I an ally? Because I believe every one needs to know that God loves them, as they are. It isn't necessary to use a lot of God talk to communicate that. It doesn't feel good to feel rejected and left out of the Church or out of God's love. That has happened too often and I would like to do what I can to change it. In addition, this is an issue of social justice for me. Inequalities that exist for LGBT individuals simply isn't right. As the pastor of Penns Park UMC, I strive to do my part as an ally of the LGBT community.