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## Open to Change: PFLAG reaches out to Front Range churches to help change ministry environment

By Magdalena Wegrzyn  
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LONGMONT — The Rev. Ermalou Roller describes the moment her husband revealed he was gay as a “stunning physical blow.”

After 15 years of marriage and three children, he unburdened his secret at a couples’ marriage retreat.

“Reality had just been exposed as illusion — 15 years of illusion,” said Roller at Wednesday’s luncheon at First United Church of Christ in Longmont.

The couple divorced, and Roller poured herself into her faith, becoming ordained in the United Methodist Church in 1977. Years later, her eldest son told her he was also gay.

Roller, who is now a retired minister in Lisle, Ill., shares her story with faith communities across the country.

“I feel that there’s so much collateral damages done to families and other people around the GLBT community,” said Roller, who is in Colorado until March 15 through First United Methodist Church in Boulder’s theologian-in-residence program. “I feel part of why that happens is that people don’t know their stories.”

The Boulder County chapter of Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays sponsored Wednesday’s event to help area faith communities reach out to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals and their families.

“Churches are one of the most oppressive places for gay and lesbian people,” said Jean Hodges, president of the local PFLAG group. “The church is the place that most needs to change.”

About 30 people from a handful of churches along the Front Range attended the event.

“It was a concerted effort to reach out to churches that are now saying, ‘We don’t think this is an abomination before God, but we’re wrestling with this issue of how to be more inclusive,’” said the Rev. Rick King of First Congregational Church in Longmont.

First UCC voted to adopt an “open and affirming” position in September 1999, solidifying that people of all ages, races, cultures, abilities, genders and sexual orientation are welcome, King said.

In conjunction with Boulder Pride, the church hosts a monthly potluck for gays and lesbians, and three people from the congregation sit on the St. Vrain Safe School Coalition. In January, the church wrapped up an adult education class to debunk myths about biblical passages often used to exclude gays from worship.

Light of Christ Ecumenical Catholic Community welcomes GLBT people but has not voted as a congregation to take an official stance, said lay pastoral assistant Toni Stone.

“We’re a very young community, so we’ve had a lot of other issues on our plate,” said Stone, who attended the luncheon to learn more about PFLAG and its services. “It may be something down the road if our council or other individuals in the community decide to bring that forward.”

Carol and Dave Lille, co-pastors of First United Methodist Church of Christ in Longmont, said the event helped them better



The Rev. Ermalou Roller’s speech during a luncheon for clergy and parishioners of local churches on March 3 is aimed at helping faith communities support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender persons and their families as they come out of the closet. **Joshua Buck/Times-Call**

understand the issues GLBT individual and families face. Earlier this year, the church hosted a series of “hot topics” in the church, including a session about sexuality.

“Our goal is to try to create an environment of trust and respect where people can come to the table to talk about the issues,” Carol Lille said.

The Rev. Steve Berke of First Lutheran Church said hearing Roller’s story offered him insight into helping individuals in similar situations.

First Lutheran formed a diversity task force about six years ago to encourage openness and acceptance, Berke said. Sexuality has also been discussed within the congregation since the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to allow men and women in monogamous same-sex relationships to serve as pastors at its churchwide assembly in August.

Roller has since written a book about her own experiences and the trial of her colleague the Rev. Gregory Dell, who was suspended from the United Methodist Church for one year after officiating at a covenant service for two gay men in 1999. The book is scheduled to come out in May.

“It was cathartic for me to write the book,” said Roller on Thursday via telephone. “But I’m finding it surprisingly difficult to talk. I’m very new at this. By the time I got home last night, I felt just almost in shock. It’s very difficult, because you’re reliving that pain.”

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