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Cortland Queer Church welcomes all (if respectful)

🕒 October 29, 2018 ✉️ Contributing Writer, Local, News



Joe McIntyre/staff photographer

Cortland Protestant/interfaith chaplain Rachel Ditch, left, and her partner Courtney Stafford, right, sing together Thursday at the Interfaith Center in Cortland.

By *RENÉE K. GADOUA*
Contributing Writer

On a recent Sunday evening, two local couples discussed faith, relationships and LGBTQ identity over a dinner of soup and sushi rolls.

The casual conversation at Wild Ginger Asian Restaurant on Main Street, Cortland, included the challenges of defining sex and gender beyond the binary (he and she), religious language that's hurtful to

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LGBTQ people (the Catholic Church’s teaching that “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered”) and how gay people of faith find partners (dating apps).

Welcome to Cortland Queer Church.

The group provides “a faith space to uplift and support queer identities,” said the Rev. Rachel Ditch, a United Church of Christ pastor who leads services that typically include interfaith worship, prayer and music.

Queer Church grew out of “the damage done to queer people in the name of faith,” Ditch said.



TODAY'S FRONT PAGE



“There are churches in this area that do not believe you can be queer and be people of faith. We’re providing a space where we can intentionally identify our faith and our queerness and say that’s not true.”

Ditch and her fiancée, Courtney Stafford, planned the Sept. 9 dinnertime gathering “to meet around the table and share about our lives.” On Sept. 23, the couple hosted a screening of “Love, Simon,” a movie about a gay teen. They invited students of the SUNY Cortland Interfaith Crew to view the movie, socialize and eat s’mores around a campfire.

“If you’ve been treated badly by your faith, you’re likely to be suspicious of a traditional church,” said Paul Mikowski of Cortland, a clinical psychologist in Ithaca who identifies as queer. (“Bisexual is too binary,” he said.) He and his wife of three months, Alex Mikowski, a heterosexual woman who calls herself “straight but not narrow,” have attended Queer Church since it began in January.

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Feeling unwelcome

Just as many LGBTQ people feel excluded from faith communities, many LGBTQ people of faith feel unwelcome among the queer community, Paul Mikowski said. “I’ve definitely experienced suspicion as an openly spiritual person,” he said. “That’s from trauma people experienced in church.”

“There are open and affirming churches in the area, but queer folks are not at the center,” said Stafford, whose faith practices include crystals and Tarot spirituality. “You’re not going to find sermons that talk about queer people of faith.”

Queer Church preaches that “all are worthy of love and dignity” and “all people are created in the image of the Holy, and that they are cherished deeply by the Holy One.” The interfaith services draw on “a variety of sources of holy text and divinely inspired words,” Ditch said. That includes excerpts from “The Little Prince,” the 1943 novella by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, poetry and Reza Aslan, the controversial religion scholar, author and television producer.

“Ultimately it’s about providing a service so people can feel connected to their faith,” Ditch said, adding that the 12 to 15 people who attend come from faith backgrounds that include Catholicism, Judaism and paganism.

‘We’re welcoming’

Ditch, who uses the pronoun “they,” is executive director of the Cortland County Council of Churches, director of the Cortland Interfaith Center, and Protestant and Interfaith campus minister at SUNY Cortland. Queer Church is a program of the Cortland Interfaith Association and the Cortland County Council of Churches.

“We’re welcoming to everyone as long as you can be respectful and welcoming to everyone else,” Ditch said. “You’re not asked to show your queer card at the door.”

People questioning their faith, their sexual identity or how the two relate are welcome, Paul Mikowski said. “It’s as good a place to ask questions as anywhere else,” he said.

Colin Albro, program coordinator for the Cortland LGBTQ Center and a gay man who grew up in Cortland, said the city “is a mixed bag” in its treatment of LGBTQ people.

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“Being a small, rural community, I’m more often pleasantly surprised at how accepting people are,” he said.

Still, “A lot of LGBTQ individuals are constantly gauging their environment to be safe and where they can be honest and affirmed,” he said. “People tend to be more reserved about who they’re open with.”

He sees Queer Church as a positive addition to the community. “A lot of what the LGBTQ community suffers from is isolation,” he said. “It’s another service that offers a safe place.”

Renee K. Gadoua is a freelance writer and editor. Follow her on Twitter [@ReneeKGadoua](#).

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