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After a long and winding personal journey, Rev. Lawrence Richardson was named the lead pastor of Linden Hills United Church of Christ in late October. Photo by Nate Gottlieb

By Nate Gottlieb

The Rev. Lawrence Richardson smiled at over 50 of his congregants, who stood clapping in the moments after he was delivered long-awaited news. On Oct. 27, Richardson was named the lead pastor of Linden Hills United Church of Christ at 42nd & Upton in a near-unanimous vote. He is believed to be the first black transgender clergy person in the state's history. "Thank you all," he said. "The future is so bright, and I'm so honored to be on this journey with you."

SEE RICHARDSON / PAGE A14

Depolarizing the dinner table

Better Angels aims to help liberals and conservatives understand each other

By Michelle Bruch

Ian Stade thinks he just might be ready to talk about politics with family over the holidays. The Tangletown resident recently walked to Washburn Library for a Better Angels workshop that covered strategies for non-polarizing conversation.

"They get it. They get that there's got to be a way for us to get along with folks we disagree with in a constructive way," Stade said. "It's not about being right — it's trying to be understanding. You're not trying to win."

Thanksgiving dinners ran shorter in 2016 for people who crossed party lines, according to a study published in the journal Science. Bill Doherty, who directs the Marriage and Family Therapy Program at the University of Minnesota, is one of the co-founders of Better Angels, a nonprofit that aims to help liberals and conservatives understand each other. He said he sees political differences splitting families apart like never before.

"Families are the last bastion of political diversity," Doherty said. "A Trump supporter? A socialist? Whatever your worst fears are, they are represented in that person. And they're in your family."

His biggest piece of advice? Don't try to change anyone's mind — you probably won't.

"If you want to rant about a particular politician, make it clear you're not putting all supporters into the same box," he said. "You can make strong, passionate points for your viewpoint without attacking the motives of everybody on the other side."

SEE BETTER ANGELS / PAGE A15

The Hill & Lake Press is asking for help

Neighborhood newspaper has survived 43 years

By Andrew Hazzard

Sometimes it takes fear of losing something before you can really appreciate it. For readers of the Hill & Lake Press, that fear came in October, when the 43-year-old community newspaper's editor Jean Deatrick put a note on the front page letting readers know the monthly paper was struggling financially and that it would need help to continue. The Hill & Lake Press (HLP) covers the neighborhoods of Cedar-Isles-Dean, East Isles, Kenwood and Lowry Hill, offering news coverage and opinions and publishing meeting minutes and local notices. Like

many small newspapers today, HLP is currently embattled, with fewer staff writers and a smaller budget than in its heyday. "The question is, in this day and age, is a print newspaper still of value to the people in this community?" said Michael Wilson, an HLP contributor and local historian.

'They had fun'

The Hill & Lake Press began publishing in 1976 as a paper for East Isles and Lowry Hill. Kenwood joined in the first few months, and by 1979, the paper included

SEE HILL & LAKE PRESS / PAGE A11



Hill & Lake Press managing editor Jean Deatrick and her daughter, business manager Heather Deatrick, stand with the newly printed November edition of the paper in Jean's Lowry Hill home. Photo by Andrew Hazzard



New Wedge ice cream shop
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Turkeys in Kingfield
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Holiday gift guide
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Indoor play spaces
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FROM **RICHARDSON** / PAGE **A1**

Richardson, 38, has been at the church in various roles since 2014, most recently as associate pastor. He's the church's fifth lead pastor since the late 1940s but has perhaps the most unusual story of any of them.

A St. Paul native, he was raised female in a family of Southern Baptists. His father physically abused his mother, and his parents separated when he was 6. After a period of homelessness, his mother eventually began a romantic relationship with another man, but he, too, was abusive, both physically and sexually. At 9, Richardson moved in with his paternal grandmother.

Richardson said his life stabilized in the years after the move. But at 16, his grandmother saw him holding hands with a gender-nonconforming person and was furious. Richardson identified as queer and had romantic relationships with people of different gender identities.

His grandmother, a devout Southern Baptist, thought homosexuality was an abomination. Richardson said she kicked him out the night she saw him holding hands, and he was homeless for the next nine months. His grandmother let him return with the onset of cold weather on the conditions that he not "be gay" and not return to their St. Paul church, Shiloh Missionary Baptist. She and his great aunts also subjected him to an exorcism.

"I finished out my senior year [of high school] coming home as late as I possibly could and leaving as early as I possibly could," he said.

Richardson graduated Highland Park High School in 2000 and matriculated to St. Catherine University in St. Paul. He said he maintained good grades his freshman year but became depressed, in part because of his isolation from the church, to which his grandmother said he couldn't return. Church had been a central part of his life, and Richardson said he felt alienated without it.

"To not have that, it was like, 'Oh, what do I do?'" he said.

Just before his 20th birthday, Richardson said he attempted suicide by overdosing on pills. His grandmother was the first person who was called.

"For her to see me there, it made her feel responsible," he said.

Richardson and his grandmother reconciled after the suicide attempt, and he took time off of school and moved back in with her. She died of lupus in June 2004, at age 66. Richardson's father, with whom he had been estranged and who also had lupus, committed suicide four days after her death.

It was around that time that Richardson began seriously considering a career in the clergy. He began working as a part-time associate minister at a smaller church in 2004 while finishing at St. Kate's and beginning a job with Ameriprise Financial. But he said he felt a "calling" to become a pastor and to spread the "story of God's love."

"I know what it's like to live in a space where you don't feel loved by anyone," he said. "To know that the most supreme being loves you, that kind of trumps everything else."

In 2006, he began seminary at Liberty University, a Baptist school founded by Jerry Falwell, Sr., a famously homophobic televangelist who once described members of a gay-friendly church as "brute beasts."

Richardson said he attended the school because he wanted to have leverage with his more conservative family and because

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It was really great to be in a place that wanted my gifts and skills and not just what I could do for their marketing material."

— Rev. Lawrence Richardson

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— Rev. Lawrence Richardson



Photo by Nate Gotlieb

he planned on preaching to people who "thought that LGBT people are going to hell and can't go to church."

He said he loved his classes there but mostly stuck to himself. One of the few non-white students at Liberty, he said he has had to choose which of the school's lessons to keep.

"Apart from its very conservative and sometimes sexist and racist ideology that — if we're honest — I think all religious systems have to face," he said, "the things that I learned are still serving me today."

In 2007, a year before Richardson graduated seminary, he was introduced to the United Church of Christ, a liberal mainline protestant denomination, through a TV ad the denomination had created.

The ad showed a diverse group of people, such as a gay couple, a single mom and an Arab man, being "ejected" from a church. At the end of the commercial, a message on the screen said that "God doesn't reject people," and "neither do we."

"I said just kind of out loud in passing prayer, 'God, if I ever find a church like that, I will serve that church with my life,'" Richardson said.

After graduating, Richardson served as a youth pastor at Lyndale United Church of Christ and also worked as an associate pastor at Grace United Church of Christ. It was around this time that Richardson, who had never identified as female, started grappling more deeply with questions about his gender identity. He said that when he first heard the word "transgender" at age 28, it was a label with which he identified.

"By that next January, I was like, 'This is me,'" he said.

Richardson started gender therapy in February 2010, began taking hormones in June and legally changed his name that July. He also underwent gender-reassignment surgery. He said it wasn't until 2013 that he could look in a mirror and feel comfortable with who he saw staring back.

In January 2013, he officially became pastor of Shift United Church of Christ, an online church he had founded. Between 2010

and 2012, he also sold trans-specific medical supplies, such as chest binders, prosthetics and urination aids, through his company, Stand-To-Urimate.

Richardson had a longtime female partner in the 2000s, and they separated during his transition. He officially earned his ordination in the United Church of Christ in 2013 and found a position at Linden Hills United Church of Christ in 2014. He subsequently worked as a consultant and then an associate pastor for the church before the Oct. 27 vote.

"It's quite a wonderful partnership," Richardson said.

Pastor Lawrence

Founded in 1902, Linden Hills United Church of Christ was originally a "summer church" for Minneapolitans who didn't want to go back to the city for Sunday worship, said the lead pastor, Rev. Eliot Howard.

It was a Congregational church until it became affiliated with the United Church of Christ in 1961. It's considered by the UCC to be an "Open and Affirming" church, meaning it welcomes LGBTQIA people into all ministries, rites and church offices.

Out of the nearly 5,000 UCC churches, about 1,600 are Open and Affirming, said Andy Lang, who runs the denomination's Open and Affirming Coalition.

Howard, who became pastor in 1993, said Richardson is a good listener who makes people comfortable and has a "deep faith" that "guides him and makes him who he is."

Kathryn Kaatz, who serves as the church's assistant moderator — a lay position that's equivalent to vice president — said she's always felt strongly that Richardson is good for the congregation.

"I think he can be very visionary, and that's what a lot of mainline Christian churches need these days," she said.

The Rev. Norma Burton, who has been the church's community minister for over 28 years, said Richardson brings an enthusiasm for trying new things.

"Lawrence is a very easy person to like and

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I think he can be very visionary, and that's what a lot of mainline Christian churches need these days."

— Kathryn Kaatz,
Linden Hills United Church of Christ

to love," she said. "He's very thoughtful of people. He makes everyone feel welcome."

Richardson said one thing that attracted him to Linden Hills United Church of Christ is that the congregation doesn't judge him for his gender identity but sees him "first and foremost as 'Pastor Lawrence.'"

"It was really great to be in a place that wanted my gifts and skills and not just what I could do for their marketing material," he said.

For now, he is adjusting to the new role alongside Howard. He said his immediate goals are to "firm up" connections with local neighborhood organizations and elected officials, increase sustained donations and secure the future of the building. The church is looking to co-locate with another congregation.

The congregation isn't worried about losing the building, Richardson said, but it wants to ensure that it remains "a viable community space that extends beyond all of our lives."

He said he sees himself being at Linden Hills UCC for at least 15 years, noting that he's in his third year of a 10-year leadership program for which the congregation is paying.

His inclination to stay for the long term appears to please his congregants.

"He's a real person," Burton said. "I think he's very secure in who he is, and I think when people are that way, it's very easy to relate to them because you're not always waiting for them to be somebody else."