



One with God in a Many-Splendored Place: Church Celebrates 25 Years of Diversity

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By Deborah Salomon

Feature Writer

Somewhere, over the rainbow, in Pinehurst, stands a white church with a New England steeple, sky-lit sanctuary and contemporary tenets.

During April, the 85 members of Congregational Church of Pinehurst (CCP) celebrated its 25th - anniversary.

Many Moore County churches are older. Most are larger.

What, then, sets this church apart?

"Everything," says 94-year-old founding member John Carsten, a retired IBM executive and World War II veteran who has subscribed to five denominations. "We don't wear coats and ties, which encourages - people to come. We welcome anyone, regardless of age, prior affiliation or orientation."

Carsten continues in a strong, almost defiant voice: "This is a church of the laity where the congregation rules - no pope, no bishops."

Just the Rev. Brent Bissette - mesmerizing speaker, talented vocalist, pragmatist, compassionate pastor, and openly gay.

"Brent is sensational," Carsten says. "This will make the church true, make it for our world today," an - opinion echoed by Lou Josselyn, a member of the pastoral search committee convened in 2006.

"Brent was the best candidate," Josselyn believes. "In view of the times, the choice was appropriate."

His wife, Phyllis Josselyn, adds: "It was a drawing card."

Indeed, besides attracting retired couples, singles, families and the disaffected, CCP drew gay and - lesbian people seeking inclusion. Currently, they -comprise 10 to 15 percent of the congregation.

However, church council chairwoman Kathy Nekton explains, "We are not a one-issue church. This - community discusses and respects all points of view."

New Ideas, New Country,

New Pastor

Congregationalism - a falling away from the Anglican Church - came to America with the Pilgrims and survived hard times.

In the late 1980s, conflicts arose at Community Presbyterian Church in Pinehurst. An offshoot group began meeting in homes; then, as it grew, the firehouse and Lions Club.

The group, calling themselves the Fellowship of Christian Friends, affiliated with the United Church of Christ (UCC, founded in 1957), partly because its structure allowed local branches some self-determination.

CCP came into being on Easter Sunday 1988, first with lay leadership, then part-time Pastor Bill McGinnis, from Community Congregational Church, in Southern Pines. Founders acquired an 11-acre tract in 1989; the sanctuary opened Christmas Eve 1993. An office wing, memorial garden and children's playground followed in 1999.

Bissette's road to the Pinehurst pulpit was, like that of his congregation, one less traveled.

Bissette grew up Presbyterian, moving around the South, the only child of a teacher and J.C. Penney employee. He studied American history at Rhodes College in Memphis, preparing for a career in political science. Hebrew Scriptures 101 altered these plans.

"That was it - I found it fascinating," Bissette says. "It peaked my curiosity and questions. My thoughts turned from politics to academia."

However, Bissette found material covered in a master's program at University of Chicago surprisingly dry.

"It wasn't about lives," he says. "I realized my call was to be on a spiritual journey."

Bissette enrolled in a theological seminary, where he met his wife. They have a daughter, who recently earned an MSW from the University of North Carolina. "But something had been simmering, slowly, for many years."

The simmering seeped into his marriage. "I was honest with my wife. She engaged the conversation and struggle. I never felt outside God's love; I credit that to my Presbyterian upbringing."

Bissette's parents were surprised, confused, sad and angry.

"When a child comes out, the parents go into the closet," he says. Ultimately they accepted his orientation with affirmation and love.

After his daughter's birth, Bissette asked, "What do I have to give this child that is of worth and value as she grows up?"

His answer: "The most important thing is an authentic life, to have a father who is truly himself. Then she would feel the freedom to be truly herself.

"This is what a parent wants for a child."

Bissette and his wife left a rural North Carolina congregation they had been co-pastoring without revealing the "deeper reason."

The marriage ended when their daughter was 3. Bissette continued as an active, involved parent.

New Age, New Image

Back in the early 1990s, an openly gay pastor presented a problem for the Presbyterian hierarchy.

"I approached the committee on the ministry," he says. "They deserved to know. They were grappling with this issue. I thought I might be a helpful part of the conversation."

Instead, Bissette was barred from serving as a parish minister ("I felt hurt, angry, misunderstood") but was allowed a hospital chaplainship in Durham.

"I missed being a celebrant of the rituals - Holy Communion, baptism," Bissette says. "I became tired of getting to know someone deeply and quickly and then wondering what happened to that guy."

Bissette began attending a UCC church in Chapel Hill.

"I discovered I was UCC at heart," he says. "Faith ought to be socially engaged."

He transferred ordination to UCC and started looking for a job. Coincidentally (or maybe not), CCP's interim pastor was on vacation. Bissette lived in Durham. He was invited to come down and preach.

"I started the sermon by singing," he recalls. "That got their attention."

After a second sermon, the committee requested a resume, which included his status as an openly gay man. The issue did not surface during a first interview.

"I pondered, do I bring it up?" Bissette decided he would, if not mentioned during the follow-up.

"I started sweating, knowing I'd be the first to talk about the elephant in the room," he says.

Then, Bissette recalls, "A guy leaned over and said, 'If you're about to tell us you're gay - we already know.'"

Bissette applauds the committee.

"They weren't looking for a gay pastor, but when one fell in their lap, they had the wisdom to say we are looking for someone who has the skills, graces and gifts to help us grow," he says.

Bissette's partner supported the move. Initial anxieties faded when he experienced welcoming from Sandhills residents and clergy.

"People still have gut responses," Kathy Nekton adds. Some prospects have affiliated elsewhere.

"But this whole process was open and affirming," Nekton says. "We are in the middle of a very conservative area. This church is a place for people who don't share those views. I'm glad Brent is here."

With a Song in His Heart

Services at CCP have become legend.

Bissette's aura shines through: charismatic, witty, intelligent, nuanced, colorful, as though touched by an angel and Andrew Lloyd Webber.

A drum circle draws worshippers into the sanctuary. Drums, leader Matthew Bahr explains, are indigenous to primitive peoples. Drum circle participants needn't have experience - or even a drum: A trash can suffices.

"This is about community-building, not how well you play," Bahr says.

Yet they sound heavenly. During closing hymns a woman feels comfortable dancing a private dance behind the seats - one, a rocking chair used by mothers with small children. A prayer bell, its chime fading into nothingness, ends the hour.

On April 14, CCP celebrated its milestone anniversary at Sunday morning worship. Bissette wore a white alb; his stole was decorated with folk-art doves and flames. Hugs accompanied greetings. Applause happened, often. The choir, led by Robert Cox - amazing.

Following prayer and songs, Bissette commenced his message by singing, -a cappella Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind," a haunting ballad protesting the Vietnam conflict. Bissette connected wind and spirit, relating it to Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus.

"No lectures. You always get an interpretation of Scripture that makes you think," says Bob Hoffman, a member since 1998.

The following Sunday, Bissette opened his sermon with a better-than-Mr. Rogers version of "There Was an Old Woman Who Swallowed a Fly," using the kiddie ditty to illustrate the interconnection of all creatures.

"This reminds me that our actions are part of a chain leading to healing and great, great joy," Bissette concluded.

The congregation then moved outside to dedicate a peace pole, part of an international movement begun in 1955 by a Japanese man, in response to Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One of Us

Reaction to the congregational doctrine as preached and practiced by the Rev. Brent Bissette ranges from appreciative to profound:

As a child, Gail Harrell had no choice about attending Baptist services. "In the -military I grew away from the church," she says. "When you're gay and in the closet, there's not a lot of places you could worship and feel safe, welcomed. I didn't feel judged here. I felt loved."

Gini Power: "I felt a sense of freedom and friendship right from the beginning."

Another attendee simply made a beckoning gesture: "This is the 'y'all come' church," she said with a smile.

When Presbyterian Marian Maroney moved to the Sandhills from New York in 2008, she tried a different venue every Sunday. "Nothing felt right. I came from a church a mile down the road and never looked back."

Because of what he -experienced at CCP, Dr. Michael Soboeiro, an internist at Pinehurst Medical Clinic, will travel more than a mile.

Soboeiro, a lifelong Catholic, strenuously objected to how the Raleigh diocese urged Catholics to support Amendment One, which adds the ban of same-sex unions and domestic partnerships to the state constitution.

"That's a secular issue," Soboeiro says. "It made me extremely angry that the church was telling people to discriminate. I didn't want to go there anymore."

Bissette has performed one same-sex "marriage" ceremony which, although not legal, employs the same vows and meaning for participants.

A friend suggested Soboeiro take a look at CCP.

"Brent is wonderful," Soboeiro continues. "His sermons are about how God is looking for people who do what they can to help the least of their brothers."

As a result, Soboeiro decided to leave his practice and relocate his family to Raleigh where, through Wake Health Services Indigent Care, he will treat the underserved and uninsured.

"We are so sorry to be losing Mike," Bissette says.

Someone will take his place on the row by the tall paned windows, because life goes on in this serene white church surrounded by trellises and gardens.

So will its projects, which include supporting a school in Mali, participating in Habitat for Humanity Apostles' Build and the Thanksgiving Interfaith Community service. In the prayer shawl ministry, knitters create shawls which are blessed during worship before being given to people who are sick or in crisis.

The church hosts speakers on secular and sacred topics - some controversial.

"Our involvement is vast for a congregation of 85," Bissette notes.

The pastor belongs to Sandhills Pride, an advocacy/support group. He and his partner have settled in; they enjoy music, cooking, walking in the woods with their dog, who sometimes accompanies Bissette to the church office, where decor includes rainbows.

Because this is a place, Bissette tells his congregation, "Where we celebrate the sameness of people and give thanks for the ways we are different - as well as the ways we are the same."

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