

Bridge between faiths: Lutheran minister leads Episcopal congregation

By Devon Lash
Staff Writer

Article Launched: 11/11/2008 02:54:56 AM EST



STAMFORD - The Rev. Mark Lingle is not a typical Episcopalian minister.

He wears a small gold hoop earring in his left ear, he is an accomplished triathlete and he hosts monthly services to bless pets. Lingle's most unusual characteristic, however, sets him apart from almost all other Episcopalian ministers.

He is Lutheran.

"We're all Christians," said Lingle, the minister at St. Francis Episcopal Church, which has buildings on Long Ridge Road and Old Long Ridge Road. "We just have a brand that we prefer, but we need to move beyond that and see ourselves as Christians who love God, spread the gospel and help those in need."

Lingle is one of 18 Lutheran ministers in the country who serve Episcopal congregations, said John Brooks, spokesman for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

After an agreement that took effect in 2001, known as Called to Common Mission, the Lutheran and Episcopal churches agreed to have members and leaders work together on social missions.

The agreement allows for a pastor of Lutheran or Episcopal faith to lead the church of the other faith, if the congregation supports it.

"In our denomination, we have 10 or 11 thousand active pastors and many are reaching retirement age," Brooks said. "We have new pastors coming, but the numbers are not equal to the number of retirements."

The churches are "so close in theology and liturgy," Lingle said, that many parishioners wouldn't know the difference.

"The core teachings are

very, very similar," he said.

The churches have different hierarchies and histories, Lingle said. During the liturgy, the Eucharistic prayers are slightly different; the entrance procession is not practiced as often in the Lutheran tradition, and the general confession and absolution are done in different parts of the liturgy.

"I had to make some adjustments," Lingle said. "Mostly, it's very small turns of phrase."

Lingle is an example of St. Francis' motto, "Inclusive - Because Diversity was God's Idea," in action.

"Everyone is welcome here," said Joan Galliven, who has been a member of the congregation for more than four years. "That's what drew us here in the first place."

Standing with her husband, Bob, Sunday outside the historic church built in 1834, she estimated that up to half of the congregation was raised in another denomination.

"Another rector overheard someone say in a derogatory tone, 'Oh, St. Francis, they'll take anybody,' " Lingle said. "That is the best thing anyone could say about us."

Lingle took over after the congregation's longtime pastor, the Rev. Richard Mayberry, retired a year ago.

Mayberry brought Lingle to St. Francis for a part-time Christian education position. Lingle was so well-liked that Mayberry invited him to be assistant minister in 2002.

Interfaith and ecumenical missions are Lingle's passion, Mayberry said, remembering when the usually soft-spoken Lingle turned into a "Chatty Kathy" after a particularly exciting Congress of World Religions in Barcelona, Spain.

"He really looks at the big picture," Mayberry said. "That's his love."

Lingle's Lutheran background never gave Mayberry a moment's hesitation, he said.

"The churches are very close liturgically, and he brought new little twists," Mayberry said. "We had Reformation Sunday and he brought Martin Luther into his sermons. . . things we hadn't thought about before."

Lingle said he never imagined while growing up in the rural Midwest that he would find himself preaching to an Episcopal congregation on the East Coast.

"This is a great parish," Lingle said. "Everyone is very open and hospitable to all religious traditions and all walks of life. That's refreshing."

- Staff Writer Devon Lash can be reached at 964-2242 or devon.lash@scni.com.