

Lehigh Valley Episcopal congregations join to offer welcome and presence at Lehigh Valley Pride-In-the-Park for the first time

By T. Scott Allen

*Enlarge the site of your tent,
and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out;
do not hold back; lengthen your cords
and strengthen your stakes. Isaiah 54.2 (NRSV)*

On a beautiful August afternoon the Episcopal churches of the Lehigh Valley joined together to have a ministry of presence and hospitality at the Lehigh Valley Pride-In-the-Park festival at Cedar Beach Park in Allentown.

The “Episcopal Tent” was graciously loaned by Mr. Mickey Brown of St. Andrew’s Allentown and owner of Michael Thomas Floral Designs. Father Patrick Malloy of Grace Church, Allentown, coordinated the volunteers and contents of the tent. All 500 red bag clips, emblazoned with the Episcopal shield and the phrase *God made YOU for a purpose, the Episcopal Church welcomes YOU* were handed out. Official attendance was set at over 5,000.



“For the last eight years we have purchased a combined ad for the Episcopal churches of the greater Lehigh Valley and Diocese of Bethlehem in the Festival publication, The Pride Guide. I wanted to do more by creating an opportunity for a people-to-people interaction to involve the Episcopal Church in sharing the Good News of God’s welcome to the gay community,” said Father Scott Allen of St. Andrew’s Allentown, who served as organizer of the Episcopal presence at the Festival. “It’s *out there* evangelism which involves the Episcopal congregations in the community as a visible presence with a community who often feels alienated and rejected by the Church,” Father Allen said.

More than 40 members of the Diocese from six parishes (Grace Allentown, Mediator Allentown, St Andrew’s Allentown, St. Anne’s Trexlertown, Trinity Bethlehem; and

Trinity Easton) worked the shifts to offer bag clips, free bottled water and information on the Episcopal Church to Festival goers. Of the 40, only four or five were themselves gay. Funding came from the participating parishes, the Diocesan Safe Spaces Task Force and Integrity/Bethlehem. The Pride Guide ad (created by Father Allen's daughter, Olivia) also included Trinity Mt. Pocono, Nativity Cathedral Bethlehem, Christ Church Stroudsburg, and St. Margaret's Emmaus.

"I was expecting a lot more questions from attendees about Lambeth," commented Rich Riddle of Mediator Allentown. "I didn't get a single question in that realm. The people I spoke with were glad to see a church presence there. I also expected a lot more conservative protestors to be there, but there were not that many and they were more respectful than I expected. Other than that I had a great time and I would definitely do it again."

The staffers at the booth did not try to convince our visitors of any theological position about any issue, including the issues related to sexuality that concern our Church and the Anglican Communion. All staffers may not even have held the same position. They did not discuss it. "What our sisters and brothers did was extend a welcome to everyone who would receive it," said Father Malloy. Volunteers handed out brochures for all the congregations that sent them, as well as literature from Integrity concerning the conversation in our Church about Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgendered (GLBT) people and their place in our common life.

"What struck me was that many of the passersby were just stunned that this was a whole diocesan community and not just one parish," said Dixie White of Trinity Bethlehem.

"I really enjoyed talking to all the people and everyone was really nice – all ordinary people just like us," said Cindy Bowlby of St. Andrew's.

Bowlby joined Terry Gangaware of Trinity Easton in being stunned by the number of pets there. "I think next year we ought to add some sort of hospitality for pets such as water and shady rest area." Gangaware added, "I thought it exceeded my expectations. You certainly don't think of churches going to festivals like this, but I'm glad we were there and the people who came to the tent were genuinely glad we were there. It's definitely worth the time to do this. I hope that the welcome we gave is remembered and acted on by those persons who attended the festival who may be looking for a spiritual community."



Visitors at the Episcopal Church Tent on a sunny day as volunteers hand them water, information and bag clips!



The volunteers from St. Andrew's Allentown pause for a photo: Front: Jean Evans; Back (L to R): Bill Updegrave, Cindy Bowlby, Marlene Mitchell and Irene Pennington.



Tent staffers with information table and bag clips.



Jeff Buchman of Mediator, Allentown with a map which invited passers by to pushpin their place of residence.

[The Rev T. Scott Allen is priest-in-charge at St. Andrew's Bethlehem/Allentown.]