

PICKING UP hitchhikers part of Rev. Rappolt

By KAREN CUBIE
Gazette Staff Writer

"Don't tell the story of the Good Samaritan, or call yourself a Christian, if you're not ready to pick up hitchhikers," said Rev. Hannah (Tabby) Rappolt, a fire-spark-igniter in her usually mild-mannered eyes.

"I pick up hitchhikers, and I've never had a problem," the part-time pastor of the 50-member Dighton Community Church continued. "I've met some very interesting people, and I've had some amazing experiences with being able to help people I couldn't otherwise."

Her husband, George A. Rappolt, a software developer and artificial intelligence specialist, isn't crazy about the idea.

"But he understands it's a necessary part of acting my faith," she said. "I'm not sure it doesn't bother him less than my coming home grumpy after a difficult board meeting. Living your faith is the most important thing for anyone."

When the 35-year-old Unitarian minister calls herself a Christian, however, she doesn't mean in the traditional sense.

"We are Protestants who do not hold Jesus is central to our faith," she said. "We believe there is God, and all alone. While Jesus was a tremendously great teacher, he isn't a component of God," she continued.

"The Dighton Community Church is Christian, but I am not," she said, "unless you believe a Christian is someone who follows the teachings of Christ."

Questions eternal life

She says eternal life is not an issue she deals with.

"No one has ever come back to tell me what happens," she said. "Certainly, the body is gone for good. The spark of divinity in each of us returns to God and goes home. Whether or not it gets recycled I do not know."

"Unitarians have a wide range of beliefs about it," she added.

Approximately one-third of the members in her present congregation were from the former Unitarian Church's original congregation. Their beliefs are similar to Rev. Rappolt's.

"But there are about two-thirds whose needs need to be met and dealt with," she said. "It is the most difficult thing about my ministry in this church. I am here not to expound my own beliefs, but to meet the spiritual needs (of the congregation).

"Sometimes it means singing hymns that are uncomfortable to me," she said, "and preaching things I'm not interested in."

It also means preaching from the Bible more than she would like to.

"The Dighton Community Church demands the Bible be used all the time," she said. "My personal preference is to use it like any other inspirational research."

A graduate of the multi-denominational Andover Newton Seminary, she raised more eyebrows by her beliefs while in

school than by her gender.

"Andover Newton was half women by the time I got there," she said.

Her gender has never hindered her career.

"I haven't felt stopped by anything," she said, "partly because I don't believe anything could stop me."

"A woman more focused on her womanhood than on her ministry will probably not be a good ministerial candidate," she said. "She'll worry too much about inconsequential. But any woman who knows what she wants to do with her life will do fine."

Knew life's work

She has known almost all her life what her life's work would be.

"I was about 13 when I decided what I wanted to do," she said. "My parents didn't believe it until my graduation from seminary. They thought I'd be a teacher, or a doctor, but they keep themselves comfortable by saying, 'It's just another service profession.'"

She did have a few problems finding a church after her graduation from seminary.

"The church that accepted me was refreshing," she said. "A lot of churches said they couldn't not hire me because I was a woman, but they said a woman pastor didn't fit the image they wanted to project in the community."

"Things have changed a lot over the six years I've been in the ministry," she continued. "People focus less on gender and more on performance. That's the way it should be."

Her career has never been an issue with her husband.

"He knew before he married me this was what I was planning to do," she said. "It comes with the package. My kids, (Ethan, 7, Pele, 4, and Amanda, 2) never knew anything else."

Her oldest son was confused when she took a year off from the ministry.

"Will you still be my mother?" he asked me," she said. "It was part of his identity."

She feels women have special qualities well-suited to the ministry.

"The ministry is amazingly like motherhood," she said. "You have to have the ability to nurture, and firmly but calmly wean, and make independent. You need a good balance between carrying people and making them stand on their own two feet. I think women understand that better than men."

Part-time human

Although she and her family live in Marlboro, the part-time label on her job is misleading.

"I find myself here for evening meetings, and special events," she said. "It's like being a part-time human. You can't do it."

The one basic issue the family faces is how to deal with a church expecting a team when a minister is hired.

"My family doesn't end up ministering, though," she said. "I try to keep them as insulated as I can."

"People don't know how to relate to a minister's spouse who is not female," she said. "Churches are accustomed to getting a good deal of work out of a minister's wife."

"It's a problem for churches that hire men, too," she admitted. "Most women work now and can't be available Sunday mornings. But I do expect George to put more into the church than most men."

For the most part, she lets her family members decide for themselves how involved they will be.

"I do insist the family show up Sunday morning, reasonably dressed and reasonably well-behaved," she said.

In many churches, the minister's wife also acts as church secretary.

"In (a church she held earlier), there was a church member who did secretarial work part time," she said. "Here, I am essentially the church secretary. When I was an undergraduate, I felt I wouldn't need to type. I was going to have a secretary. Now I've had to teach myself."

Parish calls her favorite

Parish calls are her favorite part of the ministry.

"I get to be with people in a relaxed situation," she said. "They're not just faces in the pew."

"Calls are being emotionally," she admitted, "but they're the best part of the job. I am the representative of the body of the church. When I go to a nursing home, I am the assertion of the church we wish to be present to this person."

What is her most important function?

"Being available and present to my people when they need me, whenever, and for whatever they need me," she said. "Whether it's Sunday morning, or a single mother going up the wall, and I'm the only one she can think of to call for respite care, or an old woman who needs to talk. There are a great many reasons why people need me to be there for them. Somebody has to be there."

Internal bickering within the church is the most difficult part of her job.

"There's always internal bickering," she said, wearily. "It wastes time and causes hurt feelings. It's hard when you love all the people, but hate the issues. It's hard when you far; or to be fair without participating in quarrels. It's also hard sometimes to remember you love all these people."

"I deal with it by taking a long breath before I say anything, and using that breath to think," she continued. "I remind myself continually that God loves these people and expects me to. I try to look at it through God's eyes for a few moments."

The ministry hasn't really surprised her.

"No more than people disappoint and surprise," she said. "Once in a while, I'm astounded at how good or kind, obnoxious or cruel people can be for no good reason. "Anyone who works with people will find that."

Church briefs

Women meet

ter, Barbara Ellis and organist, Ted Foster, will then lead the residents in hymn singing.

The finance committee will meet June 17 in the Pastor's study at 7:30 p.m. under the leadership

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