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Divine diversity

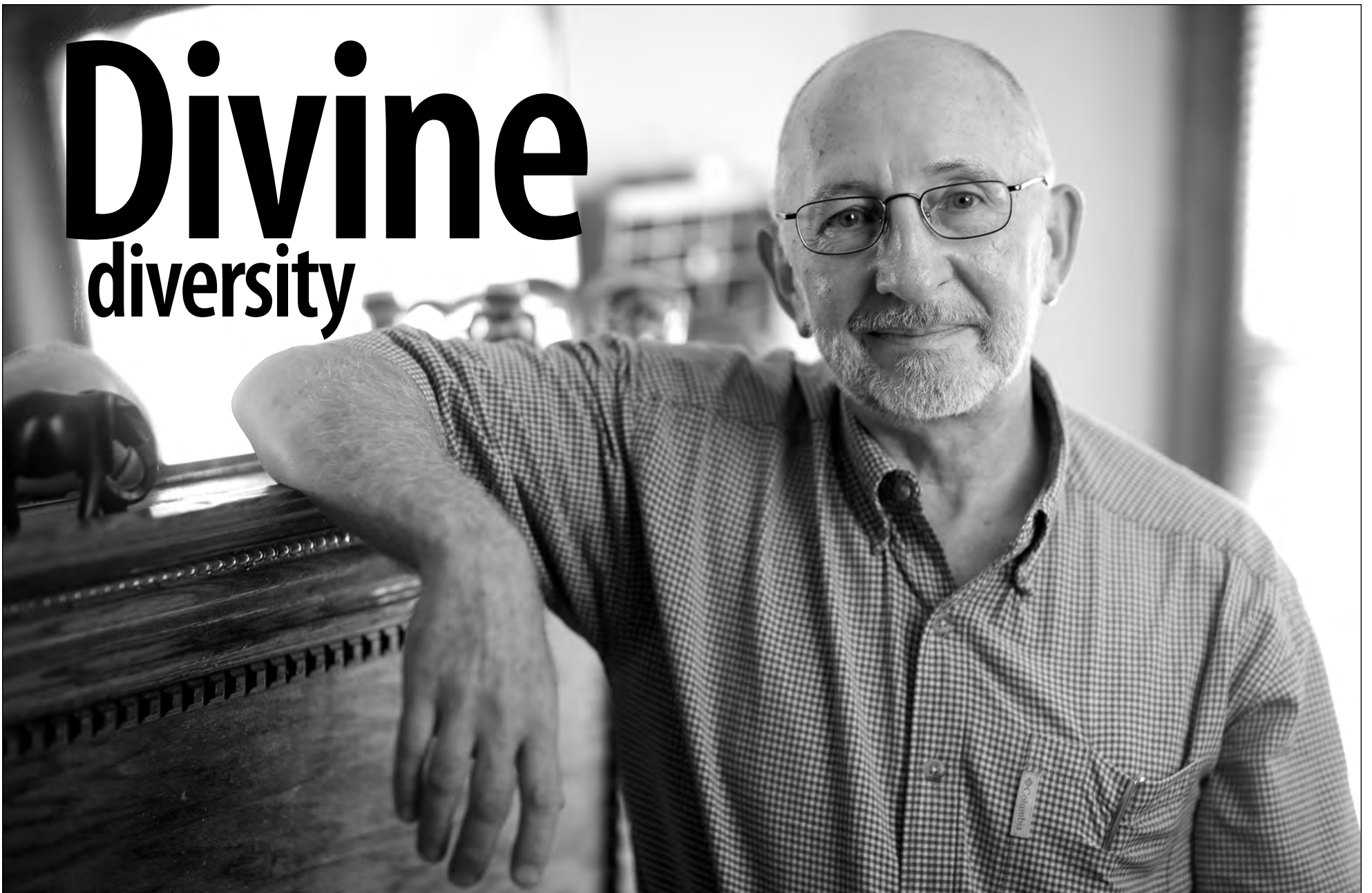


Photo by Josh Hawkins

By **TOM HOLMES**

Former Oak Park pastor Greg Dell is no stranger to struggle. His latest is with Parkinson's

On Sunday mornings the Schattauer family drives from their home in Oak Park to 3344 Broadway on Chicago's North Side to worship at Broadway United Methodist Church.

They make the trip, in large part, because of the pastor—Greg Dell. “Greg’s made a big difference in my faith,” said Paul Schattauer. “What he’s given me is something that can never be taken away, a validation of *my* faith.”

Marcia Schattauer was introduced to Dell and the congregation when Paul took her to a service there 10 years ago—on a date. That Easter morning was the first time she had been in a church in 20 years. Growing up in a fundamentalist congregation, she remembered feeling “less than a Christian.” She didn’t know her Bible verses well enough and didn’t pray the way her relatives

thought she should.

Instead of a lot of judgment, however, what she felt from Dell and the people assembled for worship was that “wherever I was and who I am is perfectly accepted as a Christian.” With tears in her eyes she added, “I didn’t have to prove myself. I didn’t have to do anything to feel like I’m a Christian.”

Spencer and Lucas Schattauer, on the other hand, said that they liked Pastor Dell because he lets them take candy from his office.

While describing their motivations for making the long drive to just south of Wrigley Field, the Schattauers never mentioned the headlines Rev. Dell has been making for the last eight years. In 1999 he was tried and

convicted by the United Methodist Church of violating a ban on blessing homosexual unions, sparking an intense debate in that denomination and in some cases widening divisions within the church. After a one-year suspension, Dell returned to Broadway.

He made the news again this summer. In a June 10 story, the Chicago Tribune reported that because of Parkinson’s disease, Dell was resigning as Broadway’s pastor, going on disability and moving with Jade, his wife, to an apartment in Logan Square.

Embracing what’s inside

What inspired the Schattauers was not that Dell was famous but he and the congrega-

tion he has been leading made them feel accepted. Underneath the headlines, which focus on the controversies in which Dell has been involved, the underlying theme voiced by many who have known him and Jade is that their ministry has been about inclusion.

The theme of inclusivity was repeated by those who knew Dell when he was the pastor of Euclid Methodist Church in Oak Park from 1985 to 1995. Kathy Hansen, a lay leader at Euclid when Dell was pastor there, remembered how he would turn the microphone off during the children’s sermon because “that was their special time with him. He felt strongly that the children needed to be free to say anything to him without fear that the adults in congregation would burst into laughter or disapprove of what they

See *DELL'S FUTURE* on page 42

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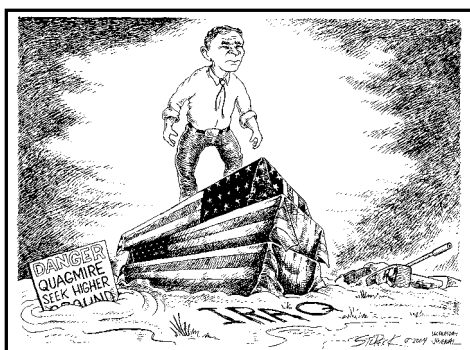


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Frank Pinc

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WEDNESDAY
JOURNAL
of Oak Park and River Forest



Photo courtesy of Greg Dell

ISSUES AND ANSWERS: As pastor of Oak Park's Euclid Methodist Church, Rev. Dell spoke in Mills Park on the matters of peace in 1991.

DELL'S FUTURE

Passionate inclusion

from page 39

said. They bonded with Greg and one another."

Rev. Ed Hiestand, pastor of River Forest United Methodist while Dell was in Oak Park, remembered how Dell broke down barriers among the clergy when he invited Rev. Robert Cross, a Roman Catholic, to participate in a study and prayer group. Hiestand added that Dell also taught a course on life rituals with Rabbi Gary Gerson.

Kevin Johnson, now an openly gay pastor in California, said, "When my United Methodist conference could not make a new appointment to a local church because I was out of the closet, Greg invited me to a couple of meetings at Euclid Church and treated me as a colleague, when I felt like an outcast."

Paul Schattauer made this observation: "Broadway feels like an accepting church, not a gay church. I think that everyone, if they're honest with themselves, would admit that there's a part of everyone's psyche that feels unacceptable. The emphasis here is on embracing what you have inside."

Creating a safe harbor

Broadway Methodist members who attended a farewell and Godspeed reception for the Dells on June 16 talked about inclusivity as well. Katy Clusen, who is raising a two-year-old daughter with her partner, said, "Both Greg and Jade have provided for me and my partner a warm, wholeheartedly loving foundation for us to grow our family. They have worked to give us the spiritual and community safe harbor that is Broadway."

Clusen echoed Hansen's comment about children when she said, "Even though [our daughter] is so young, she has been touched by him. Everyone knows what a soft spot Greg

has in his heart for the babies and little ones. I think baptisms were always one of his favorite 'duties.' He beamed with joy and delight as he held our daughter aloft in a jubilant procession around the sanctuary, proclaiming 'welcome your new sister, sisters and brothers' as everyone clapped and cheered."

Paula Dempsey, a Broadway member, said that Dell and Broadway have had a national and even global impact. She acknowledged that some in the church have responded intensely and negatively to Dell's stance on blessing gay unions, feeling that he is "outside the Word," and they "wish we'd go away." Others react just as intensely in a positive way. "We know," she said, "that there are Christians around the world who hold onto the fact that Broadway is here and openly welcoming to all, and for many that serves as hope, even if they are in a place where they cannot be open and true to themselves."

PADS founder

The key to understanding Pastor Greg Dell, it seems, is that his reputation for being a prophetic voice for justice and/or a troublemaker comes from a deep identification with, and compassion for, those who live on the margins of society. When he was in Oak Park, Dell was the co-chair of the first board of directors of the newly created Tri-Village PADS as the homeless shelter was known at the time.

Charolette Lill, the chair of the Staff-Parish Relations Committee at Broadway, says that his "outspoken, daring challenge to homophobia" and his service on the Executive Committee of the national Commission on Religion and Race for the United Methodist Church come from the same source.

Lill put it this way, "To hear the voice and witness the tears of even one person who thought she would never find a church home means more to me than any impact Pastor Greg may have had on broader church policy. However, I also believe we are in the protracted, painful final struggles of a



Photo by Josh Hawkins

NEW, AGAIN: Greg and Jade Dell start the next phase of their lives in a Logan Square apartment.

battle that has already been won in Christ to reunite all people as one body, celebrating diverse genders, sexual orientations, races, and creeds."

Regarding how he is dealing with his disease, Dell admitted to feeling angry at times. "This has pushed me in terms of my faith," he said in the Tribune interview. "But in the midst of it, God always works to open another

door or another window."

Carl Rinder, a Euclid member who knew Dell during his time in Oak Park, came to this conclusion: "Greg said many times at Euclid that part of a deep faith is an ability to be angry about situations involving pain and loss, but that they never have the last word. This disease will not destroy him. It isn't the last word."

Q&A with Greg Dell

Wednesday Journal: What has it been like emotionally/spiritually to let go of Broadway and parish ministry?

Greg Dell: Parish ministry is that to which I have felt called for nearly 50 years. I was licensed to preach when I was 12. For almost every moment of that time I have felt incredibly privileged and almost embarrassingly happy to have the opportunity to respond to that call by serving as a pastor. I know that ministry—faithful living and serving—is not over for me. But after almost half a century living ministry in one expression, what form it will take now leaves me baffled. I'm a little scared, a lot curious, and fundamentally hopeful.

WJ: If you ask people about your legacy, many would talk about the gay marriage issue. Many at Broadway, however, talked about being accepted. What do you think? What are you proud of that you've done? Anything you wish you go do over? Or am I asking the question the wrong way?

Dell: I hope the central witness of my ministry has been the joyful, passionate insistence that all of creation has the spark of God's divine image and blessing on it. Diversity, therefore, is to be

celebrated. When it is feared or—even more tragically—condemned or injured, God's vision for the harmonious interplay of divine variety is thwarted. So whether it's issues around sexual orientation, gender, race, the environment, or poverty, it's all the same struggle. "Gay marriage" is only one arena for that struggle.

WJ: What are your plans for how will you use the hours now at your disposal?

Dell: When I went on full disability, I did a three-day solo retreat at the Cenacle to try to discern what God wanted me to do with all this suddenly available time.

WJ: Where are you at at the moment?

Dell: Still unpacking our household. After that comes discernment time.

WJ: What has it been like to have Parkinson's?

Dell: Strange. At "stage two," where I am, there are days or at least parts of days when I feel symptom-free. And then out of nowhere, with no discernable cause, I develop severe anxiety, or I begin experiencing uncontrollable tremors or I lose my ability to speak or have all three and more at the same time. It's really frustrating, often demoralizing and sometimes hilarious.

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