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**Two faiths of a kind / Small congregations share more than a building**

Author: STEVEN SPEARIE CORRESPONDENT [spearie@hotmail.com](mailto:spearie@hotmail.com)

Bishop Jerry Wood sits in a chair in the main aisle of a former west-side Springfield Baptist church as a worker tends a balky, harrumphing furnace. Dressed in black clerical garb, Wood is discussing the United Independent Catholic Church, which he helped found in 2002 after being involved in other like-minded independent church movements.

The Springfield parish that Wood tends, St. Nicholas, hardly has registered in terms of numbers of members (only five so far, with about 50 throughout the denomination, Wood says), but with a new worship space that it shares with Heartland Community MCC, he remains undeterred. "We want a core constituency that becomes the heart of the parish," Wood says, "and we want to grow from that. I wouldn't have stayed here if there wasn't the potential for growth. "I think there is a hunger for that sense of community. Some will stay, or some will say, 'This is not my cup of tea.'"

Both Heartland Community and St. Nicholas are sensing a re-birth, and not only in terms of its new worship space at 402 N. Dawson St.

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A MASS THAT WOOD later celebrates with a Springfield priest, the Rev. Brian Carrigan, attracts a handful of friends and family on a bitterly cold afternoon, and with final rites pronounced on the furnace, portable heaters are rounded up.

Liz Jackson has made the trip over from Decatur. A former coworker of Wood's at an Illinois state agency, Jackson has become part of the independent Catholic movement out of desire and necessity.

Jackson, an online support technician at Richland Community College, is divorced and remarried, so she was shut out from some of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church. "It was a big part of my life I no longer had," says Jackson, 56. At St. Nicholas, Jackson no longer feels outcast. "I can follow (the liturgy) step-by-step. It's very comforting."

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HEARTLAND COMMUNITY interim pastor Allan Cook sees the international Metropolitan Community Church, which long has had a primary outreach to the gay, lesbian and bisexual community, as shifting its identity from "the gay church" to one embracing "human rights." An associate professor of teacher education at the University of Illinois at Springfield, Cook has served as Heartland's interim pastoral leader for the past five years. He says church membership isn't bound by sexual identity, and those exploring membership mostly fall into the Generation X category.

"Certainly not all our members are gay," says Cook, 56. "We have a lot of young professionals who didn't grow up with a faith."

"The way I see it, this is a civil rights movement," David Bishop says of the denomination's shift. The 66-year-old Bishop, who is retired from the Southern Illinois University School of

Medicine, says Heartland and its MCC predecessors in Springfield have had a long history of outreach, from work with Habitat for Humanity and local food pantries to sponsorship of the Phoenix Center, which provides services to gay, lesbian and straight individuals. Heartland's move, predicts board and longtime church member Amanda Kemper, will be beneficial for current and future members. After sharing worship space with First Presbyterian Church (321 S. Seventh St.), Heartland moved to a storefront at Monroe and Lewis streets. "It's something I pushed for," says Kemper, 58, an executive director of a Springfield not-for-profit agency. "It's bigger, better and nicer. You're seeing people coming to services with more consistency, so that's a vote for it."

Once a month, an MCC minister from St. Louis preaches at Heartland. And while Cook still carries the "interim" tag, he and Kemper envision having a full-time minister, "but probably couldn't support one now," Cook says, adding that the membership currently is at 25. "If we grow as a church, we could," Cook says.

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WOOD, 51, SAYS St. Nicholas' exposure in the community has been minimal. Before joining alliances with Heartland at the new location, Wood's basement was the church's chapel. A former seminarian for the Springfield Roman Catholic diocese, Wood also studied for the priesthood as part of a Franciscan religious order.

Wood was ordained in the Ecumenical Catholic Church, another independent movement outside of the Roman Catholic Church, by Bishop John Reeves. Reeves is a former priest of the Springfield diocese serving as a bishop in the UICC in downstate Marion.

While the UICC is more in line with the Roman church theologically - there are no departure points on the Trinity or transubstantiation, for instance - it embraces women's ordination, the election of bishops and welcomes people regardless of sexual orientation. Reeves, who like Wood was excommunicated from the Roman church because of his participation in the independent church, says the UICC doesn't advertise itself as "a gay church. But if people are openly gay and go to your church, then you're labeled a gay church."

Both UICC and Heartland have looked at the shared worship arrangement as beneficial. St. Nicholas has a Saturday evening vigil at 5 p.m. with Heartland holding services on Sundays at 10:30 a.m.

"We work around each other's schedules," Wood says. "They've been supportive of us, and we're trying to give back by decorating the church and staying out of the way."

"We preach a message of welcome and everyone is a member of the family," Cook adds. "(Our congregations) are the best kept secrets in town."

\* Heartland Community

Service time: 10:30 a.m. Sunday

Phone: 726-8411

On the Web: [www.heartlandcommunitymcc.org](http://www.heartlandcommunitymcc.org)

\* St. Nicholas

Mass time: 5 p.m. Saturday

Phone: 726-8411

On the Web: [www.uicchurch.homestead.com](http://www.uicchurch.homestead.com)

