

CHICAGOLAND EXTRA

Tiny church names community minister

HIV-positive pastor aims to break down barriers

By Jennifer Day
SPECIAL TO THE TRIBUNE

A few years after learning he was HIV-positive, Rev. Rudra Dundzila founded the first HIV/AIDS ministry in Madison, Wis. It was the late 1980s, at the height of the crisis.

Twenty years later, the disease has become more manageable, and the need for HIV/AIDS pastoral care services has become less acute, leading Dundzila to refocus the scope of his outreach.

On May 17, he will be installed as community minister at the Second Unitarian Church, where he will coordinate pastoral care services at the church, at 656 W. Barry Ave., in the Lakeview neighborhood.

"For me, it's very important to be very public about [having HIV], to break down those barriers and break down those walls of misunderstanding," said Dundzila, a professor of humanities and comparative religion at Truman College.

"If you think back to the 1960s when cancer was such a dirty word, now we recognize cancer as a disease of the body, and it's transformed the way people think of cancer: HIV/AIDS still carries a lot of stigma, and society is still struggling with how to deal with people who have HIV/AIDS," he said.

Since 2001, Dundzila has been working with the church in short-term roles, leading its Faith Development and Pastoral Care programs. By formalizing its relationship with Dundzila, the church hopes to extend its reach in the community, said membership coordinator Lisa Todd.

The church has about 275 members, about 20 percent of whom are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender, Todd said, but the fact that Dundzila is a gay, HIV-positive man wasn't part of the decision.

"It's more about the qualities and gifts he is willing to give to the community," Todd said. "It's about the ways that he has been able to reach out to our own pastoral care team and help people who are in a time of crisis and need a listening ear."

RELIGION NOTES

INSTALLATION SERVICE

Second Unitarian Church of Chicago will install Rev. Rudra Villius Dundzila as its community minister. Dundzila is professor of humanities and comparative religion at Truman College and an adjunct faculty member at Roosevelt University in Chicago and Starr King School for Ministry in Berkeley. He was ordained in Lithuania in 1991. 10:30 a.m. Sunday. 656 W. Barry Ave. Call 773-549-0260 11.

FLAG CEREMONY

St. Alban's Episcopal Church will honor every fallen United States soldier in the Iraqi/Afghan war by staking an American flag on the front lawn of the church. The flag will remain through Memorial Day. This event is open to everyone; 9:30 a.m. Sunday. 6240 N. Avondale Ave. Call 773-763-8845.

EU2CHARIST

Grace Episcopal Church in Oak Park will hold a concert featuring the music of U2 performed by the local band Elevation, with guest preacher Mike Ivers. 6 p.m. Saturday. 924 Lake St., Oak Park. For more information, visit graceoakpark.org.



Rev. Rudra Dundzila greets attendees Sunday at the start of services at Second Unitarian Church. ANDREW A. NELLES/PHOTO FOR THE TRIBUNE

In addition to his work at Truman College, Dundzila previously served as chaplain to the Night Ministry, an organization that helps homeless youths, and the AIDS Pastoral Care Network, which has closed.

Although pastoral care is essentially the same for all situations, Dundzila said he thinks the fact that he is HIV-positive gives him special sensitivity to issues people who are ill face.

Kathy Koch, a member of the pastoral care team who has worked with Dundzila for about two years, agrees that it's easier to relate to people who share your problems. But Dundzila would be compassionate anyway, she said, because "that's who he is."

"He's very dynamic, very compassionate, very intelligent," she said. "He has a gentle way about him ... that just inspires us and encourages us to be there for other people."