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Gay bishop talks of challenges, progress

BY TINA LAM/FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER
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In a hallway at the conference of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, a rainbow display of stoles -- bright scarves worn by priests and ministers -- was on display. On each stole was a personal message from a church member or minister describing how churches had accepted or rejected them.

A white stole embroidered in purple was from Jim Maynard, an American Baptist Church pastor who resigned from the ministry in 1997 because he feared his being gay would be too divisive an issue for his congregation.

Rabbi Stacy Offner had sent a tallit, similar to a stole, celebrating becoming the first lesbian rabbi in Minnesota in 1984.

Bishop V. Gene Robinson knew how they all felt.

One of the three-day conference's keynote speakers at the Renaissance Center in Detroit, Robinson recalled the day he was consecrated as the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal Church in 2004. He and his partner wore bulletproof vests beneath their clothes because of death threats.

But Robinson was proud his church was changing. The choice to make him bishop split the Anglican Church worldwide between those who supported Robinson and those who said a gay man shouldn't be in the position.

Four years later, the battle rages. Still, people call for his resignation.

"It's as if they think this would all go away if I was gone," he said Saturday.

Although Robinson finds the fight discouraging, he said progress has been made. More churches have talked about gays and lesbians in their midst, and more have sanctioned them as ministers or leaders.

In his speech, Robinson told the crowd of more than 2,000 people from all over the country that they were heroes.

"This room is full of people of uncommon courage," he said. "This conference could not have been imagined when I was growing up."

At a table in the hallway, Thomas Nelson and his wife, Linda Karle-Nelson, of Farmington Hills handed out literature. Each has a gay son from a previous marriage.

Nelson said his son and four of his five daughters have left the Catholic Church because of its stance on gay people, while Karle-Nelson's son has found a congregation that is open and accepting.

"Churches once supported slavery," Nelson said. "Someday, this will change, too."