

# Stoles project tells a sad gay story

**JANET HAAS**

The Gay Men's Chorus of Charlotte and the Shower of Stoles Project toured 18 houses of worship around Charlotte during March. I had the pleasure of seeing the unique pairing at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte.

The Shower of Stoles Project is a collection of more than 1,000 liturgical stoles, each representing the story of a gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender religious leader. Some were defrocked. Others took an early retirement. Still others serve in houses of worship. One-third of the stoles were donated anonymously.

On March 30, at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Charlotte, cut-out human-size silhouettes with colorful stoles around their necks stood -- almost like visitors -- behind the congregation. "Love of God for all people" was embroidered on a white stole. Another, donated by a minister whose deceased father was a Methodist minister, said, "We who are children of the closet have suffered yet unstudied painful consequences of the discrimination and silence that our parents endured." A purple Presbyterian stole read "God's gift," with hands reaching upward to a cross.

"Signature" stoles, displaying a total of 3,000 signatures of straight allies, are also part of the collection. One signature stole said "straight but not narrow," along with signatures of its religious leader's supportive congregants.

SOSP is a symbol of support to faith communities and individuals in their efforts to end discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The exhibit, a collaborative effort between the Institute of Welcoming Resources and the LGBT Religious Archives Network, has been traveling around the United States since 1996. It can also be viewed at [www.welcomingresources.org/sosp.htm](http://www.welcomingresources.org/sosp.htm). Faith communities and organizations can also arrange for the exhibit to be displayed in their house of worship or meeting facility.

Along with the dramatic display of stoles, the Gay Men's Chorus of Charlotte treated the UUCC congregation to an octave-fueled and lyric-appropriate performance, complete with a kick line. The service ended with the men singing James Taylor's "Shed a Little Light."

The Shower of Stoles Project was "dead center in our mission," said John Quillen, artistic director of GMCC. "I thought it was a really cool opportunity."

"So many people find singing to be a very spiritual experience."

Quillen was a candidate for the Presbyterian ministry for two years. "But I decided that the church wasn't quite ready for me," he said.

Instead, Quillen focused his energies on music. As the artistic director of One Voice Charlotte (Gay, Lesbian, and Gay-affirmative Chorus), Quillen led choral performances in churches and other venues from 1994 to 2004.

"Having the opportunity to perform in houses of worship is a very strong statement," he said. "A lot of gay and lesbian people feel alienated by the church."

### **About the chorus**

John Quillen founded GMCC in 2006. The chorus is made up of 20 members, ranging in age from 22 to almost 70. The chorus is wrapping up its open audition season, with its next performance scheduled at 8 p.m. June 21 at St. Martin's Episcopal Church, 1510 E. Seventh St., Charlotte.