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Old Dutch will introduce its new dominie at its 90th annual George Washington dinner

by CARRIE JONES ROSS on Feb 23, 2013 • 5:00 pm
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The Rev. Dr. Renee House.

The Old Dutch Church on Wall Street in Kingston will be hosting its annual sit-down dinner next Wednesday, Feb. 27 at 6:30 p.m. to honor George Washington's 281st birthday. The centuries-old church will be introducing their new dominie and first female minister, the Rev. Dr. Renee House, who replaces the Rev. Kenneth Walsh, to the community. House and her husband expect to be moving into the parsonage in the middle of March, at which time she will assume leadership at the pulpit for the congregation.

House, who hails from Michigan, is a former academic librarian at University of Arizona. Completing New Brunswick Theological Seminary in 1987, she stayed on as an associate professor of practical theology, library director and then dean of students until this year. While she has been teaching fellow clergy how to be ministers to parishes, she herself has never had one. House said she has a strong orientation to multicultural and urban ministries, explaining that this interest was influenced by her time in seminary in New Brunswick.

House is an animated, youthful and highly spirited 56-year-old woman married to the retired minister of Metuchen Reformed Church, the artist and musician the Rev. Dr. Richard Ruch. House was raised by Dutch Reformed parents. She grew up on a farm. Gardening, cooking, long-distance running, cross-country skiing, writing hymns, essays and poetry, and sewing are favorite activities.

House said she was called to preach, and to be with “people on the edges.” Though teaching theology for so many years gave her the opportunity to foster higher thinking and do pastoral care of students, she said accepting the role of dominie at Old Dutch church was answering a calling to lead a congregation of her own.

Her immediate question in relation to both her new church community and the community at large is how to connect.

House said she was planning to open the church's walls and go outward into the community: rehabilitating houses, working with other church organizations, and ministering to the urban community's needs, whatever they may be.

She said she also wants to examine the bigger picture. Might there be useful or detrimental legislation and public policies that might benefit from the church's attention? An urban ministry particularly requires partnerships with fellow churches, governing agencies and institutions. House said she did not anticipate Kingston's largely rural edge around its urban core, and was surprised to discover how much of Ulster county is rural. How does that impact the city?

"I also know that offering the good news of the gospel in a place like Kingston is urgent and essential," House explained to the Old Dutch search committee when asked why she chose the Kingston church. "The church is the only institution called to speak of God's love in Jesus Christ. I have received and believe this good news with every fiber of my being! I am aching to share this witness in my words, my presence, my actions. Kingston is an urban center, but it's not enormous. I feel like we can get our hands and hearts around the reality without being overwhelmed by it."

House laments that Christianity has become "a turn-off" to many people these days. Though Christianity has been losing traction in the United States, it has significantly gained in

Latin America and Africa, thanks to what House calls “a global doxology,” a universal approach. “I want to incorporate world Christian music,” she said. “I want worship to become global.”

House said that the congregation’s acceptance of differing sexualities, races and cultures was one of the top reasons she chose to accept her role to lead there.

“Pastoral search committees are often told when looking for a pastor that you’ll know when the right one comes along, it [is] like falling in love,” said church elder and search committee team leader Rob Sweeney. “This was just the case with Pastor Renee, there was a deep mutual love that bonded both pastor and congregation.” Sweeney said he often quoted from the book of Samuel while looking at pastoral candidate profiles and reminded the committee that, “Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

The group “recognized a heart that God had selected to serve not only our church but our entire community,” Sweeney said. “Pastor Renee is the answer to our prayers, and we feel twice blessed that her husband will be ably ready to assist the congregation and community in many ways. I don’t like to admit it was a two-for-one deal, because both of them are worth far beyond any dollar value.”

Josh Bode, clerk of the Mid-Hudson Classis and minister at Woodstock Reformed Church, said Old Dutch was lucky to

have House for many reasons. “Until recently she was dean of one of our national seminaries,” Bode said.” Training ministers in the church, one of the church’s theologians. She has an enormous amount of respect. Brilliant, influential teacher of the church. And that way she is known widely and widely held in high esteem in the church. She’s well regarded personally and professionally. She’s a person of great joy and brings great joy.... Not usually a trait associated with Calvinists.”

Bode said House was “not in the ivory tower,” bringing a combination of top-notch intellect and passion for congregations in their communities. “Thoughtful, intelligent and very personal and compassionate as to world presence,” he said. “She’s brilliant, but her passion is for the church. She will bring a lot of love and joy. And a passion for where the church and community intersect. She will do it with a lot of integrity. She’s smart.”

Recently retired congressman Maurice Hinchey will give a brief speech at the dinner next Wednesday on public service on a personal level. The dinner will be catered by Connie’s Cookery. Tickets are \$35 and checks should be payable to “Old Dutch Church.” Send reservations to: Old Dutch Church, PO Box 3006, Kingston, NY 12402.