Rosa death stuns many

By Tricia Pursell Apr 4, 2010

Shock mixed with sadness among those who learned Saturday that the Rev. Jose “Joe” Rosa’s body was found in a densely wooded area of Union County, 10 months after his disappearance.

State police at Milton reported late Friday night that Rosa’s decomposed body was found the day before in White Deer Township. Union County Coroner Wanda Walters said the cause of death was an apparent self-hanging.

Milton state police Trooper Philip A. Davis said on Saturday that Rosa’s body was found farther away than police had originally searched. He said troopers would not reveal the name of the person who found the body, only that the discovery was “happenstance.”

“It’s not an area where you just walk by,” he said.

The 52-year-old Lewisburg resident had been pastor of Congregacion Menonita Shalom, in New Columbia, for seven years. He was last seen May 21 by a neighbor, who told police he saw Rosa walking toward the U.S. Penitentiary grounds near the Rosa home, and reported missing May 23.

“It’s so sad,” said the Rev. Adalberto Santiago, of Milton, current pastor of the congregation.

Other than that, he said, he had no comment. Just that it was a time to unite together and support Maggie, Rosa’s wife, and Rosa’s family.

For nearly a year, the whereabouts of Rosa were unknown. No one knew what to think, or what had happened.

That they now know does not ease their spirits.

“It was better not to know,” church member Angie Martir, of Milton, said sadly.

Jilline Bond, president of the Milton Ministerium, said Rosa was supposed to meet with her and officials of the Milton School District to plan a baccalaureate service the day he disappeared.

“He never showed up at the meeting,” Bond said. “He didn’t even call. He was always very punctual, very professional.”

At that time, Rosa was serving as the president of the ministerium. Bond was the vice president.

“It’s very devastating news,” Bond said. “All of us are saddened by it.”

Rosa’s disappearance came a short time after Bishop Samuel Lopez, of the Spanish Mennonite Council of Churches, which oversees the New Columbia congregation, notified state police that he had received a letter from a young man claiming Rosa had touched him inappropriately. Subsequent investigations revealed he had indecent contact with other boys, one as young as 9, between 2005 and 2009.

Bond said she is fairly certain that Rosa’s death was a result of his receiving this news. But that’s what saddens her the most.

“I’m pretty devastated that, if he was at that point that he felt that way, that he couldn’t talk to somebody,” she said. “It makes me sad as a pastor, and he as a pastor, that he felt he couldn’t talk to anyone, and that had to be the end result.”

He is described as a kind man and strong community leader.

“We had nothing but respect for him,” said Donna Bridge, of Milton. She and her husband had worked with Rosa to organize the Latino community event, Fiesta de Mayo, for the past three years.

“He seemed very sincere,” she said. “He was a very good leader. We just really enjoyed working with Joe.”

Rosa’s disappearance was completely out of character for him, Bridge said.

“The whole thing was a shock,” she said. “I really didn’t know what to think.”

Even though the discovery of Rosa’s body will bring a sense of closure to the whole Valley, Bond said, “It doesn’t take the pain away.”

The Milton community is left with the void of a tremendous leader who helped to develop a cultural awareness for Latinos, Bond said.

Bridge said the borough will continue to host a cultural event, but now it will also include other ethnicities, including Greek, American and Italian, and will be called the Milton Cultural Festival.

“We want to celebrate our entire community,” Bridge said.

Rosa’s wife, Maggie, serves on the committee.

“She’s very precious,” Bridge said. “Our prayers are with her.”

Bridge refuses to judge Rosa, or feel any sense of ill toward him, despite the charges he was facing.

“Because we don’t know,” she said. “We don’t know what happened. Only God does.”

Offices at Lancaster Mennonite Conference, which oversees Congregacion Menonita Shalom, were closed Saturday. No one responded to an e-mail requesting comment.