

For Russia, with love

Lehigh Valley churches open Golden Gates to the arts

By **DIANA MORSE**
Special to The Press

According to Rev. Sandy Ostman, Golden Gates is more than the lilting balalaikas, dynamic bayan accordion, and “unique trashotky and loshky” described in the Russian song and dance troupe’s publicity materials.

Golden Gates performs at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 14 in a Valentine’s Day event at Asbury United Methodist Church, South Whitehall Township.

Ostman, pastor of Epworth United Methodist Church, Bethlehem, has been host for several of the St. Petersburg-based troupe’s performers at his home, and considers the youths more cultural ambassadors than performers.

“Many come from Christian backgrounds, and all are eager to share their traditions as well as experience ours,” says Ostman, who discovered the troupe by accident nearly three years ago when the company was to appear in the Poconos.

“We got a call from our Allentown district office, asking us to help host the young people and their leaders,” he recalls.

Ostman and his congregation opened their doors, offering meals and housing to the performers then ranging in age from 10 to 19, and now featuring



Russian song and dance troupe Golden Gates performs at 7:30 p.m. Feb. 14 in Asbury United Methodist Church, South Whitehall Township.

performers as young as five.

Ostman was impressed when the performers repaid his congregation’s kindness by sharing a taste of traditional Russian song and dance during one of the church’s services. “We were hooked,” Ostman recalls fondly.

Eager for more, Ostman later attended Golden Gates’ full performance at a Kutztown-area church.

“They were fantastic, and I hoped they could return to our church, but the troupe couldn’t work a full performance into their busy schedule at the time.”

Unwilling to miss out on the troupe’s 2009 tour, Ostman

recalls closing the deal for the troupe’s Valentine’s Day performance while en route with his wife, Marilee, to Alaska to visit family.

“We were sitting in a Seattle aquarium during a stopover when we confirmed the date with their manager,” he laughs.

Ostman says the show is a vibrant display of old Russian culture, designed to teach audiences about traditional song and dance as well as entertain.

“The show is very engaging,” he says. “Cultural details are described throughout the performance, and audience participation is encouraged.”

Golden Gates performers are drawn from students at St. Petersburg’s rigorous Author’s Aesthetic Music Secondary School, and are led by Vitaliy Bezrodnov, who conceived the idea for the group in the late 1980s.

Golden Gates’ Allentown performance is co-sponsored by Asbury United Methodist Church of Allentown, Epworth UMC of Bethlehem and Calvary UMC of Easton, with support from Allentown and Bethlehem Rotary groups.

Ostman is confident Asbury UMC seating, at about 400, will be sufficient — even if he has to give up his own.

“These kids are so spectacular and the costuming so brilliant, I’d be willing to give up my seat if we run over capacity.

“This really is a cultural exchange. That’s how I look upon it.”

Golden Gates, 7:30 p.m. Feb. 14, Asbury United Methodist Church, 1553 Springhouse Road, South Whitehall Township. The church is along Walbert Avenue, between Cedar Crest Boulevard and Route 309. The event is free and open to the public. Free will offerings will be accepted. Information: 610-866-3842.