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New pastor, a Harvard grad, brings search for tolerance to Southlake

At Pathways Church, a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Southlake, new pastor can express his deep concern for human rights and tolerance

BY TERRY LEE GOODRICH
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The Rev. Tony Lorenzen speaks during a vigil Sept. 17 in Southlake as part of the national Seven Straight Nights for Equal Rights campaign. STAR-TELEGRAM/IAN McVEA



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SOUTHLAKE — When an exasperated phone receptionist hung up on Tony Lorenzen nearly 20 years ago, she had no way of knowing the effect she would have on his life.

Lorenzen, an earnest college student seeking his life's work, had been recommended by a Catholic campus minister for a program to explore entering the priesthood.

"I was [dating](#) someone pretty seriously, and I thought that would impact her," said Lorenzen, 42, of Fort Worth. He called the bishop's office to ask whether he could bring the woman along.

"Stop joking," said the woman who answered the phone.

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"That starting the ball rolling, with me eventually ending up here," said the Rev. Lorenzen, who has been [pastor](#) of Pathways Church, a Unitarian Universalist congregation in Southlake, for two months.

In his new post, he has already been outspoken on controversial issues such as equal rights for gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual people. He led Pathways, which has about 100 members, in a candlelight vigil at Southlake Town Square on Sept. 17, part of a national effort called Seven Straight Nights for Equal Rights.

"I have a huge interest in human rights and peace studies," said Lorenzen, who lives in far north Fort Worth.

Direction determined

He traces his interest in [religion](#) to his childhood observations.

He is the son of an American Indian man and a Portuguese woman who divorced when he was 10.

"I was raised by my very liberal Catholic mom," said Lorenzen, a native of Leominster, Mass. "She church-hopped when people didn't treat her as she thought she should be after she became divorced."

After graduating from Leominster High School in 1984, he earned a Bachelor of Arts in English at Fitchburg State College in Fitchburg, Mass., in 1990. He also served a senior internship with Amnesty International in Somerville, Mass.

Then came his tentative step toward Catholic priesthood — and his decisive step away.

"My relationship with the girl ended anyway," he said with a laugh.

Trying new things

He met his future wife, Tina Gaudet, when they performed for a [wedding](#) — she as singer, he as guitarist — in May 1990. They married in July 1992 and have a son, Zackary, 12.

After earning his master's in divinity from Harvard Divinity School in Cambridge, Mass., in 1994, he pastored Massachusetts churches, taught ethics and [New Testament](#) in urban Catholic schools and served as a hospice chaplain.

Lorenzen had a brush with politics in Massachusetts, where he ran unsuccessfully as the Green Party candidate for lieutenant governor in 2002.

"When I was campaigning, I would freely speak my mind on supporting universal healthcare and environmental issues," he said. "I had to watch what I said in front of school administrators, and I realized I was in the wrong place."

He learned about the opening at Pathways through the Boston-based Unitarian Universalist Association. He knew in his June interview with church leaders that the job would be a good fit.

"I was really attracted by the amount of energized spiritual folks here, the vibrant contemporary worship, the way folks here are really willing to try new things if past forms don't work in a contemporary world," Lorenzen said.

The church's willingness to be a welcoming congregation for gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual people also impressed him, he said.

"I looked at my wife and son and said, 'It's Texas. Are you ready to go to Texas?'"

They were.

It's about tolerance'

One of Lorenzen's goals is to educate people about Unitarian Universalism.

"There are many people who are Bible-thumpers or Bible-bashers. We're neither," he said. "We're noncreedal and nondogmatic. It's about tolerance."

While the denomination has its historical roots in Christianity, it includes aspects of earth-centered religions, humanism — which holds that people can be religious without God — and major world religions, such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. (Lorenzen leads Buddhist meditation at the church on Wednesdays.)

What Unitarian Universalists have in common is a search for [spirituality](#), he said. Each congregation is independent and democratic.

The denomination, with an estimated 250,000 Americans, ordains women and gay people and affirms same-sex marriages.

Lorenzen said that many people biased against gay people hide behind religion.

"You can make up all sorts of reasons — biblical tradition, or your grandmother told you, or it's Tuesday under the full moon," he said. "But either you're a bigot, or you're not. Either everyone has the same worth, or they don't. For me, that's pretty cut and dried."

Commitment praised

The Rev. Melinda Veatch, executive director of Tarrant Area Community of Churches, said she became acquainted with Lorenzen at recent meetings of faith-based groups to seek a solution to local homelessness.

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"He has a strong commitment to missions and community, and he brings a lot of energy to that, along with a sense of humor," she said.

During Pathways' search for a pastor, church leaders considered many candidates, said Eugene Stockton, a member of the church's pastor search committee.

"I was impressed with his background and his ability to preach," Stockton said. "He's warm and loving and caring.

"His sermons are very thoughtful and give you things to think about. We like that intellectual challenge."

Tony Lorenzen

Pastor of Pathways Church in Southlake, a Unitarian Universalist congregation

Age: 42

Education: Bachelor of Arts in English, Fitchburg State College, Fitchburg, Mass.; Master of Divinity from Harvard Divinity School

Background: 2002 Green Party candidate for lieutenant governor in Massachusetts

Family: Wife, Tina; son, Zackary, 12

Hobbies: Playing guitar and chess, reading and blogging

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