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Palms to Pines: Pastor and Congregation Seek Common Goals

By Deborah Salomon | Feature Writer Jun 7, 2018



Terry Yasuko Ogawa preaches at the Congregational Church of Pinehurst

PHOTOGRAPH BY TED FITZGERALD | THE PILOT

Aloha! From the Pacific Paradise of Hawaii to the golf paradise of Pinehurst comes Terry Yasuko Ogawa, to pastor a church with open doors and open arms welcoming people of all, little, or no faith backgrounds; people of differing ages, gender identities and lifestyles.

Buzz-buzz-buzz when she arrived in January at the Congregational Church of Pinehurst (CCP) to succeed the charismatic Brent Bisette.

However, Ogawa, of Asian heritage, was born and raised in Charleston, educated (environmental studies) in Michigan, South Carolina (urban studies) and California (everything else), finally arriving in Hawaii with a NOAA Coastal Management Program where, eventually, she coordinated programs for the homeless. Hawaii has the highest per capita rate of homelessness in the U.S., blamed partly on cost of living. Mental illness and drug addiction contribute.

“When people fall on hard times (elsewhere) they buy a ticket to Hawaii expecting paradise,” Ogawa says. “We tried to reconnect them with faith, if they had any, to rebuild their hope.”

Ogawa’s adoptive parents provided “unconscious place-based ethnic identity,” which made her feel at home in Hawaii.

“Everybody looked like me,” she says. “Hawaii was the first place that made sense to me culturally.” As in “Things I loved to eat — hamburgers to sushi — showed up on the same plate and nobody blinked.”

Ogawa’s CV runs seven pages, all over the globe; entries follow her from Washington, D.C., to a cross-Canada journey protesting greenhouse gas emissions. She attended conferences in Beirut, Johannesburg and Quito. The road was not without bumps. Her first day on Capitol Hill fell on 9/11.

“We were evacuated,” she says.

Ogawa sold souvenirs in an aquarium gift shop, studied plant-based medicine and received multiple academic and service awards. While at the University of Michigan, she was on the bass fishing team.

That rates Terry Yasuko Ogawa a VIP (very interesting person).

“A fascinating journey. She’s like an onion, with all these layers,” says Sam Walker, a retired Episcopal priest who now worships at CCP.

Yet for all her experience addressing environmental, conservation and social issues, “I was called to the ministry at age 15... but I needed a lot more tools,” she says.



PHOTOGRAPH BY TED FITZGERALD/THE PILOT

The threads became cloth when Ogawa enrolled in a Masters of Divinity program at Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, Calif., an ecumenical seminary that maintains relationships with the United Church of Christ (UCC) and other denominations. The school advocates for LGBT people within the religious community, as well as the study of Pacific Asian religions.

After graduating with the dean’s award, Ogawa returned to Hawaii, where she served as an interfaith resident with the Pacific Health Ministry and continued advocating for the homeless. Soon, Ogawa felt ready for her first congregation.

“I had a clear feeling that God did not call me to be a development worker or run a nonprofit,” she says, although eminently qualified. “I wanted a church that knows how to be a church, where people show up to take care of each other.”

Ogawa hit the national data bases and began networking. Still, after liberal Berkeley and international Hawaii, was a neat white church with New England-style steeple in affluent Pinehurst a good match?



PHOTOGRAPH BY TED FITZGERALD/THE PILOT

In the late 1980s, conflicts arose at Community Presbyterian Church. An offshoot group calling themselves the Fellowship of Christian Friends affiliated with UCC partly because its structure allowed local branches some self-determination. The Congregational Church of Pinehurst came into being on Easter Sunday 1988, first with lay leadership, then a part-time pastor. Founders acquired an 11-acre tract on Linden Road in 1989. The sanctuary opened on Christmas Eve, 1993, followed by an office wing, memorial garden and children’s playground in 1999. Current membership stands at about 85, with up to 10 percent LGBT. The Rev. Brent Bisette, who most recently served the congregation, had moved on to a hospice chaplaincy in Durham, leaving Martha Nilsen as interim pastor.

Ogawa found the Pinehurst listing in 2017. Its mission intrigued her. Besides, she felt drawn back to the South.

“I sent my profile and had a video conference with the search committee,” she says. “We talked about styles of ministry, hopes and dreams, even the possibility of incorporating liturgical dance.”

She asked “Will you care about me and what I care about?”

Ogawa came east for a week to meet the congregation and preach.

“I had a lot of conversations with God (during that week),” Ogawa says. “You must be calling me here, to this progressive bubble in the church. I couldn’t help but say yes.”

As for the “gay” image, Ogawa prefers “an everybody church,” which it is, integrating gay and straight, black and white, young families and senior couples. But her qualifications also include studying “queer theology” in seminary since a portion of the Hawaiian homeless had been LGBT. “Identity is an issue only when it becomes an issue — and gender is a non-issue,” says Ogawa. “But I wouldn’t have come to a church that is not affirming.”

Julia Latham (also born in Charleston and raised in Hawaii), an attorney and ally/advocate for Sandhills Pride, the Moore Country LGBT organization, understands Ogawa’s motivations: “Terry is very curious about getting down and doing the work of Christ as she understands it. This congregation is equally motivated. That’s where the partnership lies.”

Ogawa will always remember her first Sunday in the Pinehurst pulpit: “Snow and ice. I had to cancel the service.

In April, the new pastor traveled 5,000 miles to be ordained at her home church in Hawaii.

“They saw me through this whole journey — they walked with me, cared for me.” Besides, she continues, “I wouldn’t deprive those little old ladies the pleasure of baking cookies and putting out lace tablecloths.”



PHOTOGRAPH BY TED FITZGERALD/THE PILOT

Ogawa — striking, intense, serene, with long black hair and a 300-watt smile — describes herself and her sermons as intellectual, firmly based in scripture and theology.

“I like to challenge people, incorporate poetry, get drunk on the Holy Spirit,” she says.

She had a chance on Trinity Sunday, May 27. Her sermon began by interpreting a complicated theology, yet to the delight of the congregation she incorporated the cries of a fussy baby into the narrative, which concluded with a humorous anecdote (God-themed, of course) at a U-pick strawberry farm.

Sublime to earthy — something for everyone.

Sam Walker recognizes Ogawa's strengths.

"What Terry brings is energy, a clarity of purpose for what a church community can be," he says. "She felt called here. She found us and — praise God — we found her."

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