

PROFILE

The pastoral scene

First Unitarian Church of Portland welcomes an openly gay minister to its fold

by Inga Sorensen

After 33 years, Thomas Disrud feels like he's finally found his niche in life. Disrud, the son of Wisconsin cheese-makers and a former copy editor for Minnesota's *Duluth News-Tribune*, was recently installed as the associate minister of Portland's First Unitarian Church. Disrud is openly gay.

"[At the *Tribune*] I was president of the newspaper guild, which was a labor union that represented reporters and other paper employees," says Disrud, a 1985 graduate of Marquette University, a Catholic university in Milwaukee, where he majored in journalism and philosophy.

"I would do pretty run-of-the-mill things," continues Disrud, who worked for the *Tribune* from 1985 to 1991. "For instance, there was an employee—I think he was a janitor—who got sick but was not covered by health insurance due to a tech-

nical glitch. I intervened between the company and the employee, and was able to negotiate coverage for him, which saved him thousands of dollars. I really enjoyed the pastoral aspects of that work, but the constant bumping of heads was tiresome. I knew I needed something else."

In 1991, Disrud left his newspaper job to study at a Unitarian Universalist seminary in Berkeley, Calif., called the Starr King School for the Ministry, from which he graduated in May 1994.

"I grew up going to a small church that seated maybe 30 or 40 people," he says. "My family followed a mainstream branch of Lutheranism. I can remember as a youngster asking questions like what would happen to people in China who didn't know about Jesus Christ. I was essentially told that they wouldn't be saved. That was disturbing in and of itself, but so was the feeling that I got that you simply were not supposed to ask questions at all—that there was a firm set of rules and that was that."

In his late teens, Disrud left the Lutheran church. "Though I never spoke about it, I was becoming aware of my sexual orientation and somehow knew that I wouldn't be accepted there," he says, adding he soon began dabbling in Catholicism.

"I met a very accepting priest friend and began learning that all religions were not so closed," he says. "It marked a real turning point for me."

While in Duluth, where Disrud says he lived a "very quiet and closeted life," the journalist got involved with the local Unitarian Universalist Church.

"I would walk by the church and there would be interesting quotes outside it from people like Emerson. Oftentimes they were not religious quotes at all. I thought 'Hmmm, that's interesting.' Then one day I was talking to a friend who said 'You

sound like a Unitarian.' At that point I didn't know what a Unitarian was, so I checked it out," he says. "I again discovered that this was different from the type of experience I had as a youngster. We were told as Unitarians that the Bible was simply one of several documents that has wisdom—that there are many different and legitimate ways of living as a full and spiritual being. That really appealed to me."

Each of the components of Disrud's life were finally beginning to coalesce: "I was gradually coming out of the closet. I found a spiritual outlet that fit my needs, and ultimately I found my professional calling," he says.

Last May, Disrud was ordained a minister at the Unitarian Church of Davis, Calif.

One week earlier, with 96 percent of the congregational vote, Portland's First Unitarian Church called Disrud to become its associate minister. He moved to Portland in August, and began his church

duties in September, before being officially installed in late February.

"It's been a real whirlwind experience," says Disrud.

A primary tenet of the Unitarian Universalist Association, which has about 200,000 members nationwide, is to value the inherent dignity of all human beings.

"What we essentially do is work to create a sense of community and fellowship, and come together in our common search for life's meaning. This is a journey we take together," says Disrud, who will supervise a staff of 23, consult with lay ministers, and preach six to eight times annually. "This congregation is also very social-justice oriented, which I think is wonderful."

First Unitarian Church's congregation has grown dramatically, due in large part to its response to Ballot Measure 9. During that divisive campaign in 1991-92, a large ribbon was wrapped around the building declaring the church a hate-free zone. With an estimated 1,300 members, First Unitarian Church has become one of the largest Unitarian congregations in the country.

For his part, Disrud says he's found his spiritual home with the Unitarian Universalists.

"I finally found something that really feels right," he says.

As for his new geographical domicile, Disrud, who lives in Northeast Portland's Irvington neighborhood, says: "I love Portland. It reminds me a lot of Milwaukee. People are very relaxed and friendly. And it's so beautiful here. It's green and lush. I have a lot more to explore. Quite honestly, I've been so busy with the church that I haven't had a chance yet to fully get acquainted with the area or to meet a whole lot of people. That will come."

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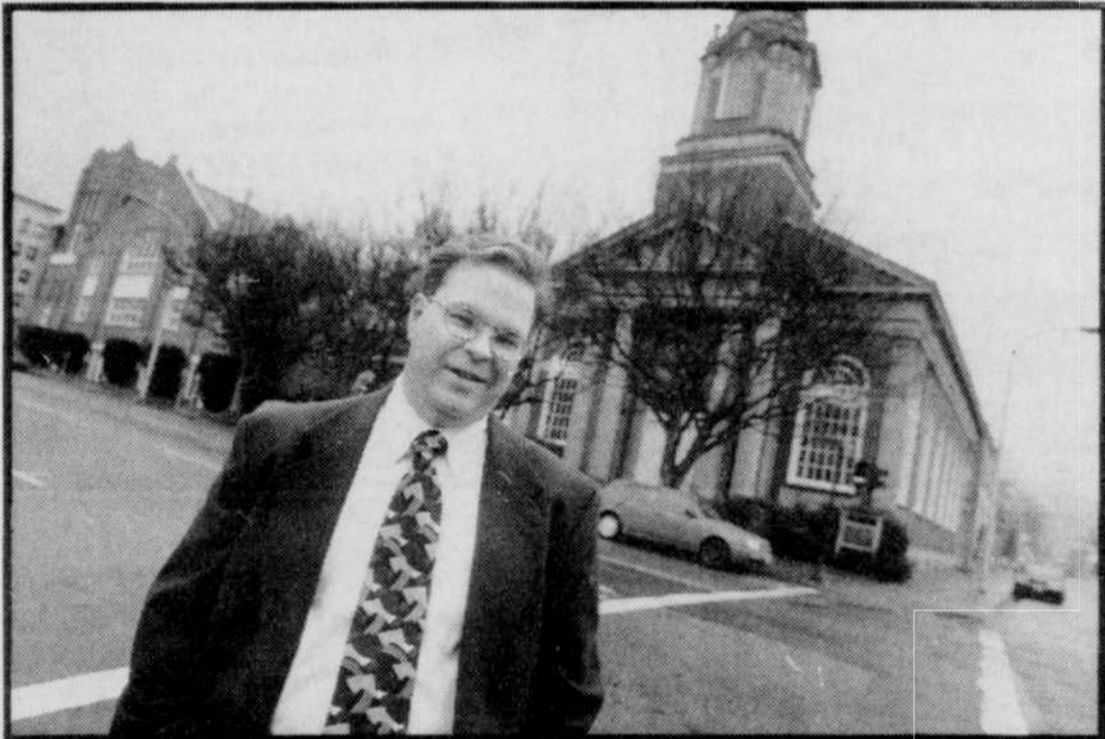


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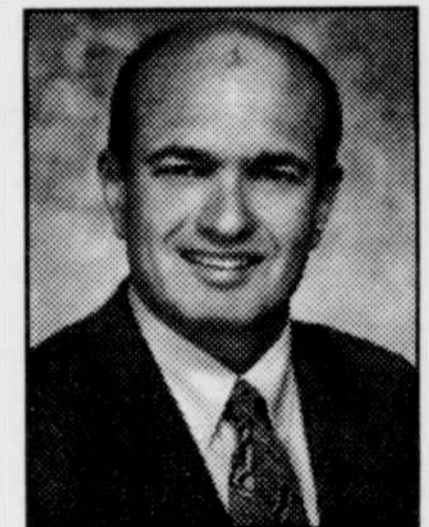
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