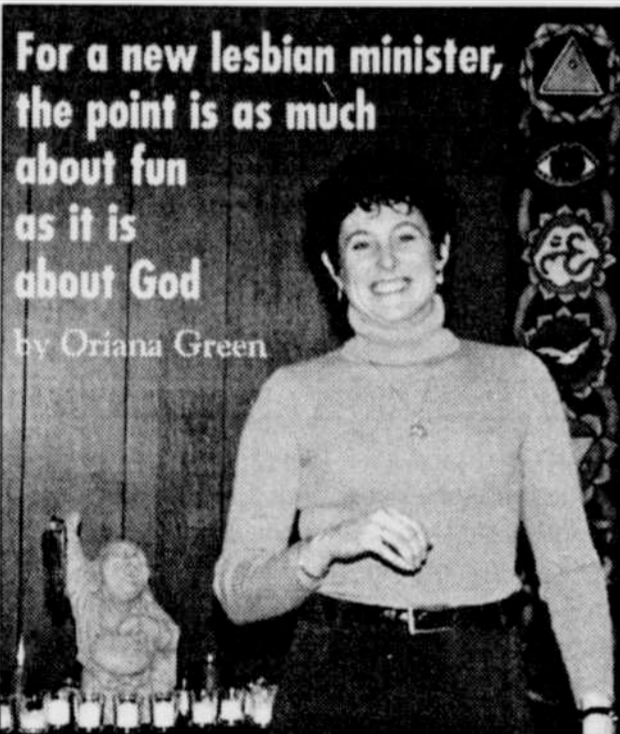


ARE YOU HAVING FUN YET?

For a new lesbian minister, the point is as much about fun as it is about God
by Oriana Green



PHOTOS BY MARY GUITRON

The Rev. Stephanie Torres believes there are people whose spiritual needs are not being served by traditional churches, even by other queer-welcoming congregations—people who travel a more alternative path, people who perhaps never fit in with a traditional church. People who might feel right at home at Grace Space, the new ministry she has started in Portland.

"We're not nondenominational," she explains with her trademark grin, "We're multidominational."

In Torres' 11 weeks as a minister and at as many Sunday services, it's already clear that people who are attracted to her message come from a wide variety of backgrounds. A very out lesbian who manages to work into each service some mention of her partner, Julie Williamson, Torres has so far drawn a mostly lesbian congregation, though as she pointed out on a recent Sunday, she's not heterophobic.

"It's a gay-friendly, gay-positive ministry—and it's also a straight-positive ministry," she told the gathering.

This was met with laughter and appreciation from the scattering of straight-appearing couples in attendance.

But in all seriousness, Torres does hope to draw a more diverse congregation.

"Until we all learn how to be together in a way that's not threatening, then we're never truly free," she explains.

Although she does not consider herself a Christian, Torres does believe Christ was one of the master teachers. She describes her philosophy as eclectic New Thought with an Eastern influence.

The roots of her philosophy are evident in her training, which she received from the Rev. Matt Garrigan, who founded the Radiant Light Ministry in San Francisco over 15 years ago. Torres has taken the entire series of Garrigan's workshops, done extensive reading and studied one-on-one with Garrigan in preparation for her ordination last October.

"My purpose in life is to inspire people to experience their own divinity," she says, adding that she respects each individual's spiritual path. "The words are just semantics—god, goddess, Buddha, tree—use whatever resonates in your heart."

Torres was born in Southern California. After her parents divorced when she was 6, she



The Rev. Stephanie Torres presides over a recent Grace Space celebration

lived with her mother in Nevada, New Jersey and finally Oregon, where she attended high school in Roseburg. Her grounding came from spending all her summers with her sister at her father's home in Los Angeles.

Though it has taken Torres, 33, until now to realize her dreams of a ministry, her views and desires stem in part from her experience as the daughter of a metaphysical minister who ran the Triune Center of Science Being in Los Angeles from the mid '70s until 1985. In true L.A. style, her childhood was anything but typical.

For one thing, her father identified as bisexual, though Torres didn't learn that until they came out to each other when she was 19.

"He was very irreverent and a lot of fun," Torres says, recalling how he often took her as a child to gay piano bars with her sister so they could all have a good songfest.

"It was like perpetual Christmas," she remembers, saying she also enjoyed being in the spotlight.

When Torres came out to her father, who had been mostly closeted, his advice to her was: "Just don't tell anyone."

It was advice she ignored. "I came out with a flourish—I wanted to tell everyone," she recalls.

Her theatrical nature was nurtured at the American Academy of Dramatic Art in Los Angeles, and Torres may be familiar to Portland theatergoers from her many appearances in local productions, especially with the Portland Women's Theatre Co. from 1986 to 1993.

"When I first moved to Portland in 1985, I thought about becoming a minister, but I had a lot to work through first," Torres says, explaining that she spent the next decade in therapy, taking classes and attending Al-Anon.

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—the Rev. Stephanie Torres

Her big theatrical break came in 1993, when she was cast in the lead role of a new play that was headed for Broadway. After spending two months in New York, Torres realized two important things. She learned that she did, indeed, have what it takes to make it in the big time, and she learned that she didn't really want that fast lane existence.

"I discovered that quality of life was more important," she says, happy that she had the guts to turn her back on the opportunity and return to Portland, which she says "feels more like home than anywhere else."

During her years in Portland, Torres has paid her bills first as a corporate trainer, then as a production coordinator on film and television projects, and most recently in private practice as a personal coach.

"I'm not a therapist—coaching is about focusing on the present and how we move forward, whereas therapy is about examining the past. My practice is for healthy people who want

to enhance their lives," she explains, adding that there is definitely a spiritual underpinning to her coaching work. In fact, another name for it could be pastoral counseling.

Though Torres is currently holding her Sunday services in a borrowed chapel, her ambitious vision for Grace Space is that the congregation will be able to purchase its own building soon.

"I imagine a spiritual center that creates all kinds of opportunities to connect with Spirit," she says, explaining her intention to rent office space to various healing practitioners.

Grace Space also expects to have room for workshops and to offer classes in various forms of movement, spiritual dance, Reiki, rebirthing, yoga and so on.

When attending one of the Sunday Celebrations, it's clear from the lively opening music this is no ordinary church. That is confirmed when, after some opening remarks, Torres leads the group in a Hindu chant. Although the Unity Church's resident hymnals beckon from the back of each pew, they are never opened.

After the chanting has subsided and a calm settles over the room, Torres launches into her talk. Petite and animated, with the self-confident stage presence of a seasoned performer, she presents her ideas in easy-to-digest bites.

It is through love and compassion that we grow, asserts Torres.

"We beat ourselves up enough—the last thing I want to do is reinforce that," she explains.

Torres preaches mainstream metaphysics and talks about recognizing your own divine power to bring about positive change in your life.

What she may lack in experience, Torres makes up in enthusiasm. It's difficult not to share in her obvious delight with life in general, and with her partner in particular. She is not shy about telling the congregation how much she adores her beloved mate.

"I think Stephanie Torres is a very dynamic woman with a clear vision of what she wants and is very capable of achieving it—and I find that an impressive role model," says one woman who has attended several services.

While Grace Space will not offer traditional sacraments such as communion or baptism, Torres is already planning the first wedding she will officiate, and she looks forward to performing commitment ceremonies, house blessings and various other alternative celebrations.

To the queer community Torres says: "I invite people to come and see if this resonates with them, and if so, then come and play with us. Because if it's not fun, then what's the point?"

■ GRACE SPACE holds a celebration every Sunday at 5 p.m. at the Unity Church of Portland, 4525 S.E. Stark St. For more information, call (503) 287-3216.

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