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# First Unitarian Church of Honolulu Inducts First Openly Gay, Asian Minister

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On Sunday, Nov. 20, the more than 50-year-old **First Unitarian Church of Honolulu** on the Pali, is poised to induct Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kwong, the Honolulu church's first openly gay minister, as well as its first Asian minister. We talked with Kwong about his new role and what it means not only for the Unitarian church, but the larger religious community and the public in general.

**HONOLULU:** Your first calling was the film industry; in 1997 you received a bachelor's in film studies from the University of California at Santa Barbara. What made you shift your focus to ministry?

Kwong: I worked in the film industry for three years, but I became disenchanted and disillusioned. People wore their dysfunction as a badge of honor. So in 2001, I enrolled in an interfaith seminary—which included Mormons, pagans, Baptists, Hare Krishna and more—and saw the need for a safe place for people to be who they are.



Rev. Dr. Jonipher Kwong

PHOTO: COURTESY DAVID FRIEDMAN

**HONOLULU:** What has this journey been like for you as a gay person?

Kwong: As Unitarian Universalists, we celebrate all of who a person is, not just the parts we like, or what is “normal.” The Unitarian church has been ordaining gays and lesbians since the 1960s. Who you love doesn't matter.

**HONOLULU:** While the Unitarian community is celebrating your induction, not the fact that you are openly gay, this is still no doubt a momentous occasion.

Kwong: It's important to celebrate. This is especially true for younger people, who may be struggling with their identity and face bullying and teen suicide. I want to highlight the church's role in honoring [sexual orientation] instead of shaming it.

**HONOLULU:** The Unitarian church is part of the liberal community and doesn't adhere to a dogma or creed. Do you expect to see more conservative religious sects inducting gay and lesbian clergy someday?

Kwong: I'm quite proud of a movement that focuses on the world we find ourselves in. I realize some religious institutions follow dogmas and creed and that it is a little harder for change [to come about]. There is hope, but it takes a lot of work in humanizing this issue. LGBT people are a part of our ohana, of our religious community.

**HONOLULU: What sort of feedback have you received about your new role as minister of the First Unitarian Church Honolulu, both from the church members and the religious community at large?**

Kwong: It's been overwhelmingly positive. Buddhist and Christian clergy and those from other faith traditions will be at the ceremony to send a strong statement that the community is behind us. We're holding the ceremony at the Jewish synagogue.

**HONOLULU: Yes, I saw that on the Unitarian church's website. Why will it be held at Temple Emanu-El instead of at the First Unitarian Church?**

Kwong: Interestingly, it started out as a matter of practicality. Our church holds 100 people comfortably, but so far, 150 people have RSVP'ed for the ceremony and we expect 200 to 250 to show up. So we chose the temple because it's larger and it's right next door, so it's convenient. But the more we thought about it, we realized it's a great opportunity to send a strong theological statement. I have a longstanding friendship with Rabbi Peter Schaktman and we're unifying our forces for the common good. We can grow from this together and hopefully move forward.

**HONOLULU: Between 2005 and 2008 you were actively involved with the Interfaith Alliance of Hawaii, particularly in regard to the chapter's involvement with the now-passed civil unions bill. What sort of work did you do in the community?**

Kwong: I was part of an interfaith team brought together for the House Judiciary Committee, then chaired by Rep. Tommy Waters to raise awareness of how this impacts the religious community. Civil unions are not just a political issue, but also a religious issue in providing pastoral care to LGBT folks. In a relationship, what matters is honor, love and commitment—gender is secondary. We had such great dialogue. We are not as conservative as some folks think we are.

**HONOLULU: I think many people often do equate religion with conservatism. What sort of challenges and misconceptions do you face as someone who is both religious and gay?**

Kwong: I think Evangelical Protestants have done a good job of stating their position [on homosexuality], they have vocalized it and made it known and I respect that. Folks on the more progressive side haven't been as good at doing this, because there is a strong unified interfaith voice on equality for all. It's just a matter of time.

**HONOLULU: Come January, will you be performing civil union ceremonies at the church?**

Kwong: Absolutely. We're in the midst of preparing a Dec. 31 and Jan. 1 service ceremony around civil unions. A dozen clergy [from other religious sects] will also be participating. We're chomping at the bit to be involved in this at the Unitarian church.

**HONOLULU: As the new minister, what's in store for the First Unitarian Church of Honolulu?**

Kwong: We're looking to grow as a multi-cultural, multi-faith community and look at the church beyond our four walls. We're working with the Unitarian Universalist community in Puna on the Big Island and thinking of adding another service at our church. We want to let the community know that we are here. Unitarian Universalists are not united by a common belief, but a common value to work for the common good.