

"The trick is asking what does 'god' mean when we are not all talking about the same thing."

BRET LORTIE, minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio



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The Rev. Bret Lortie spent time in the Air Force on bombers carrying nuclear arms before becoming leader of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio.

Uniting a diverse church

Unitarian Universalist's members are varied, and its pastor is using his wide range of experiences to bring it together.

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He went from being an aircraft inspection specialist and playing the trombone in the 571st Air Force Band to working as an editor at a peace advocacy magazine and playing in a puppet-wielding marching band that protested the Iraq War.

Now Bret Lortie is the minister of the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Antonio.

"That's typical of our ministers," said Brian Lyttle, a spokesman for the church.

After his first year, church leaders are measuring Lortie's impact. They acknowledge that going from 350 members to 390 is not a big leap compared with other churches, but for their congregation the growth has been a relief after years of being stagnant. They are seeing 10 to 20 new faces every Sunday.

Lortie, 42, is praised for bringing more structure and leadership to a congregation whose members include atheists, Hindus, Catholics and Wiccans.

But what makes parishioners excited is not the new study groups he

has started but his ability to talk about spirituality to a congregation that for decades has taken pride in its logical approach to religion.

"Anybody who is a good clergyman or minister should be able to present spiritual changes so you don't have to check your brain at the door," member Thomas Gaines said.

But that is easier said than done. "The trick is asking what does 'god' mean when we are not all talking about the same thing," Lortie said of his ability to unite people with such diversity.

As a devout Buddhist who was raised as a Christian Scientist, Lortie says he tries to get at the part of the human experience that is beyond the rational. He sees those experiences coming with meditation, prayer and music, and he works to create situations where his followers can do the same.

"But he is not 'mushy-headed' either," church member Bruce Beck said.

Lortie smiled at the compliment. When he finished high school in

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Diverse Unitarian congregation embraces leader

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Southern California, Lortie went directly into the U.S. Air Force in 1984. He ended up in Omaha, Neb., working on the planes of the Strategic Air Command. In the back of these bombers were red buttons that launched nuclear missiles. One day while working on one of the planes, Lortie sat down in the plush general's chair in the back to eat his lunch and found

he was staring at the box that contained the button.

"I sat for a long time thinking about the button. I could no longer support what I was doing," he wrote for one of his sermons. It was the first of many contradictions that would serve Lortie well, as they helped him bridge the differences between his parishioners.

He joined the National Guard and went to college and

eventually to work as an editor for the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. As a group of hardened journalists dedicated to reporting on the science, dangers and politics of the nuclear arms race, "you could not find a group of more secular people," he said.

While working as a journalist he had another epiphany when his father passed away, and he decided to seriously pursue an education to become

a minister.

Still working full-time at the Bulletin, he went to classes where people broke out in tears, overtaken by the emotions of their faith. Then he would go back to editing and finishing stories by deadline.

"The funny thing is I'm still a huge supporter of the military and the troops and all that," Lortie said. "To me now as a pastor, I try to strike the balance between compassion

for our troops and the truth that is so often not seen."

Standing in front of a congregation that has both retired military colonels and peace activists, Lortie does not see a problem, and neither does his congregation.

On front of his robe is a green sash depicting trees in different seasons. Holding it in place to the back of his collar is a pin with the wings of U.S. Air Force.