

Rodney Davis Finds Fitting Third Career As a Priest

The Recorder

By Mike McKee

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SAN FRANCISCO — Rodney Davis took a leap of faith this year, swapping a robe for a collar: the black robe of an appellate justice, that is, for the white collar of a soon-to-be Episcopal priest.

After more than 25 years on the California bench, the Republican appointee retired from Sacramento's Third District Court of Appeal in February, giving up the scholarly life for the fatherly life. He makes it official next month.



Former Third District Court of Appeal Justice Rodney Davis
Image: Jason Doiy

"Temporarily, I'm the Rev. Deacon Rodney Davis," the 60-year-old said last month. "And on Jan. 9, I'm going to be an ordained priest and I'll be Father Rod."

It's a calling that Davis said has been tugging at his heart for years. But it's a job that will place the guy who couldn't speak out on his political views while on the bench squarely into the swirl of social issues — the ordination of gays and lesbians, for example — that have the modern Episcopal church facing, or embracing, challenges to its core beliefs.

For one, Davis — a former prosecutor who staunchly backed capital punishment — can now talk about his conversion to death penalty opponent. As a judge he had to apply the law without personal feelings coming into play.

For another, he can express his support for same-sex marriages while simultaneously abiding by the church's refusal to perform them.

"We are just now grappling with officially performing ceremonies [for gays and lesbians]," Davis said. "I'm in favor of it and I believe the church will eventually approve that."

In fact, Davis performed two same-sex marriages as a justice, but only after getting his bishop's consent.

Davis — the son of former California assembly members Lester and Pauline Davis — served on the Third District for about 20 years, having been appointed by then-Gov. George Deukmejian. Before that, he was on the Sacramento County municipal and superior courts for a combined six years.

Davis had toyed with the idea of entering the priesthood long before he acted on it.

"About eight years ago," he said, "a parish priest essentially called my bluff. She was a close friend and said, 'This is something you really need to explore.'"

"It wasn't a bolt out of the blue," Davis added. "It was more like a swarm of mosquitoes I couldn't just swat away."

Getting this far has taken a lot of work. While still on the Third District, Davis alternately attended seminary in Berkeley, served as a chaplain at the UC-Davis Medical Center and gave sermons at St. Michael's Episcopal Church, the Carmichael house of worship where the Sacramento native will serve as an associate priest.

He also had to undergo a psychiatric evaluation — something he often ordered for defendants in the trial courts — to determine whether he would be a good fit for the priesthood.

"To be on the receiving end of that was humbling," he said. "The Episcopal church doesn't make it easy."

Davis' decision to leave the bench didn't surprise his Third District colleagues.

Over the years, Justice Vance Raye offered, Davis has "said things that suggested to me that he might be, well, simply that he's someone who thinks a great deal about the divine."

Justice George Nicholson recounted an incident where the aspiring priest came through for his family.

"Almost a year and a half ago, my son was involved in a very substantial car accident, and Rod was the chaplain on duty and went over to see him," Nicholson said. "It was very uplifting for my son."

He was in ICU for 16 days."

Davis also has a family to consider, but fortunately for him Episcopal priests — unlike their Catholic counterparts — can marry. Davis has a wife, Sue, of 35 years and two sons — one of whom is a lawyer in Sacramento and the other attending college.

"They've been a rock of support and stability throughout this lengthy process," he said.

Davis is counting on his judicial career to have given him the temperament and patience to be a good priest.

"Before I spent 20 years on the appellate court, I was on the trial bench and did a couple of years as a family court judge," he noted. "You certainly see a part of the community that's difficult and heart-rending.

"Those experiences," he added, "stuck with me and when I encounter them as a pastor I have a set of life experiences that gives me a bit more empathy."

Life experience also shaped Davis' support for women serving as priests, a sensitive subject within the Anglican community where many believe females should be submissive to male leadership.

"Having lost my dad to a stroke when I was three, and having been raised by a remarkable widow," Davis announced in a sermon last month, "I am disinclined by personal experience to accept such a proposition."

Davis changed his mind on the death penalty after doing a seminary paper showing that the "weight of theological opinion" backed capital punishment only in the context of community protection.

"Since my experience with murder cases convinced me that the death penalty is not effective as a deterrent," he wrote in an e-mail message last week, "and since no inmate sentenced to life without the possibility of parole has, to my knowledge, escaped, I concluded that the death penalty is unnecessary for the protection of our community.

"What remains is vengeance," he added, "which I find inconsistent with what is expected of me as a Christian."

Davis will be ordained as a non-stipendiary priest, which means he gets no salary, but will be reimbursed "for expenses, mileage, things like that."

He called that one of the advantages of having had a "rather generous salary situation" as a judge for more than a quarter of a century. And he's not worried about going broke.

"Tonight I'm going out for a parish visit to a young family," he said last month. "But today I went out and test drove new cars."
