

# Robe roles — pastoral and judiciary

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*Special Correspondent*

When Dennise Garcia was sworn in recently as the judge for Dallas County's Family District Court No. 303, the fellow helping her into her ceremonial robe was also wearing a robe, but of a different sort.

Rev. Eric Folkerth, pastor of Northaven UMC in north Dallas since 2001, was Judge Garcia's three-in-one: Campaign manager, pastor and husband. His robe represented the ordained clergy.

In last fall's elections, Garcia beat her opponent, Beth Maultsby, with 50.54 percent of the votes, 328,969 to Maultsby's 321,881, according to the Secretary of State.

As a Democrat, Garcia not only won in an election season dominated nationally by Republicans. She is also the first Latina judge in Dallas County history. Coincidentally, Dallas County voters also elected Lupe Valdez as their first Latina sheriff.

During a recent interview, the pastor and the judge reflected on the similarities and dissimilarities of their two vocations.

"We're at two ends of a pipeline," Rev. Folkerth says. "In my four years at Northaven and, before that, eleven years on the staff at Highland Park, I've married hundreds of couples. I see them at their best: starry eyed, idealistic.

"Dennise, a specialist in family law, sees them at their worst.

Their families are falling apart. There's so much anger . . ."

As he lets the thought dangle, she picks it up. "Divorce is always hard, ending parent and child relationships in many cases. It's my job to help people get through some hard times. And it is a vocation, a calling, because it's important in people's everyday lives."

Before her election, Dennise had practiced exclusively family law in Dallas County for nearly ten years. *Texas Monthly* magazine in 2003 named her a "Texas Superlawyer," and she has co-authored articles on such family law matters as ethics, visitation for children under age three, reimbursement, intellectual property, demonstrative evidence and economic contribution.

Eric has an explanation for her success: "She knows the law really well," referring to the Texas Family Code.

Knowing the law doesn't always suffice. She painfully recalls writing protective orders in one divorce and child custody case that ended in one parent murdering the other.

"I couldn't see it coming," she says. "I began to think I was in the wrong practice. Then I got a letter from another client who said I had literally saved her life."

Both chuckled when asked to picture what might happen if they

traded robes.

"Our personalities are well suited to what we do," she said judgmentally.

He said, "I'd be a horrible lawyer. I'm bad with details. I don't tell her how to rule and she doesn't tell me how to preach. Some weeks when I'm really stuck, I may ask her for an idea or a reaction. But I never try out a sermon on her and she doesn't try out a ruling on me."

Dennise calls Dallas Latina lawyer-activist Adelfa B. Callejo her role model who once told her, "You need to be a lawyer, you argue so much."

As Northaven's tenth pastor since the church's founding in 1955, Eric is the first to lead the congregation through a building program since 1980. Facilities being built on the north side of the church's property at the southwest corner of Preston and Northaven Roads will have 37,000 square feet, including a sanctuary to seat nearly 500. All existing structures will be razed. Current membership is 570. Total cost will be \$5.2 million.

Eric notes that both professions — the ministry and the judiciary — have certain expectations, even if unwritten, of practitioners' spouses.

"You know," he explained, "like attend certain events or conferences. But Northaven has no specific profile for its minister's spouse, saying that the spouse is free to follow his or her own calling. Dennise's standing as a lawyer and now as a judge is a source of real pride within the congregation, and they've been very supportive of me. We have a great family at Northaven."

As an example of that family,



Reenacting her swearing in as Dallas County's first Latina judge, Dennise Garcia accepts assistance from her husband, Rev. Eric Folkerth, pastor of Northaven UMC in Dallas.



Northaven UMC, Dallas, construction points congregation toward the future.

Senior U.S. District Judge Barefoot Sanders swore Garcia into her new office. He and his wife, Jan, are longtime active members of Northaven.

Eric and Dennise are parents of Maria, who will be eight in September. His website says they own

"a one-of-a-kind log house in Old East Dallas."

She holds three degrees, including the juris doctorate, from SMU. He holds a journalism degree from The University of Texas in Austin and the master of divinity from SMU's Perkins School of Theology.

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## Wellness . . .

- Encourage all participants to take the health risk assessment (HRA),
- Financial incentives,
- Confidential Disease Management Programs as needed for those

HRA completion is confirmed by Well Med quarterly),

- \$300 reduction in 2006 health insurance premium for the church,

- Anticipated to be repeated in