

As a young man growing up in the San Fernando Valley, the Rev. Peter Ackerman had several thoughts about pursuing the vocation of an Episcopalian priest, but never acted on them.

"It popped up a couple of times in my past, and I dismissed it a few times," he said.

The son of a classic television producer and an actress, Ackerman believed his calling was to follow in his parents' footsteps.

He landed a few minor roles on daytime soap operas or in television movies based on classic shows such as "Gidget," and even worked in production offices for legendary sitcoms such as "Friends."

But by the end of the 20th century, he knew the life of an actor or producer was not what he really wanted.

"I was so fulfilled in my life," Ackerman said. "My marriage was great, my kids were great. I loved what was happening in my church. But I realized that my vocation was the one thing that didn't feel right."

A lifelong Episcopalian, Ackerman left Hollywood behind and committed himself to the church, becoming a part-time youth leader at his local parish in Southern California and soon became a parish administrator:

Eventually, members of the church were urging him to become a pastor. He went through the training and classes to become a pastor within the church, and by 2004, found himself leading a parish in Alexandria, Va., at the request of his bishop.

Last month, Ackerman moved into his new home here in Lodi and has taken on the role of pastor at The Episcopal Church of St. John the Baptist at 1055 S. Lower Sacramento Road. His first sermon in the parish was just two Sundays ago, he said.

Ackerman said he has made it a personal goal to reach out to the Lodi community in an effort to expand the church's visibility and presence, something that has been stagnant for a number of years throughout the nation.

"This parish is very understanding of the fact that the church has changed," he said. "We know we can't continue to use the same old model of waiting around for people to come to us and join us. We have to engage the community around us, and the church is ready to do that here in Lodi."

Ackerman landed in Lodi due in part to his wife Marie, as well as his former Hollywood career.

Like many struggling actors in Southern California, Ackerman was working as a waiter at the Hamburger Hamlet in Sherman Oaks while

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looking for breaks and gigs.

One day, a new hostess was hired, and he knew he wanted to marry her. That hostess was Marie, a Stockton transplant who moved to the area with her mother.

The couple have now been married more than 30 years with two adult children. During their courtship and marriage, the couple had taken several trips to Stockton to visit her family.

"When I first came up here when we were dating, I didn't know what to expect," he said. "She was talking about farmland, but we get here, and Stockton was a city. It was just like any other neighborhood I had known back home."

Last year, while still living in Alexandria, the couple decided to take a vacation to Southern California and felt they needed to return home. Ackerman learned of an opening at the parish in Lodi and applied, and was soon hired.

"I've always had that 'small town' mentality," he said. "When we came back for a visit, we just fell in love with (California). And (Lodi) has that small town feel that I just love."

His father was Harry Ackerman, a producer who helped create episodes of "Leave It to Beaver," "Dennis the Menace," "Hazel," "Gidget" and "The Flying Nun," among others.

He was also executive producer of the series "Bewitched" for more than 250 episodes.

Ackerman's mother is Elinor Donahue, best known as Betty Anderson on "Father Knows Best" and as Ellie Walker on "The Andy Griffith Show." She also had roles on "The Flying Nun" and "Gidget," and appeared in films such as "The Princess Diaries 2" and "Pretty Woman."

While Ackerman himself did not have the same success as his mother in front of the camera, he said he did enjoy life behind the lens, working as the production assistant to "Friends" producer Todd Stevens for the show's first two seasons.

His most memorable experience, however, was working on the music video for Aerosmith's "Janie's Got a Gun" in 1988.

Ackerman said director Davis Fincher wanted to shoot several parts of the video, but vocalist Steven Tyler was delayed in the dressing room. Fincher pointed Ackerman out from behind the film crew and ordered him to stand in for Tyler, and he found himself on a stage next to the rest of the band mouthing the words to the song.



BEA AHBECK/NEWS-SENTINEL

The Rev. Peter Ackerman, the new priest at St. John's Episcopal Church in Lodi, is pictured at the church on Wednesday.

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THE REV. PETER ACKERMAN

He said he appears in the finished production for a split second.

Ackerman doesn't miss Hollywood, he said. What he really loved about it was the people he met, and he remains friends with many of them today.

Along with taking on his new role in Lodi, Ackerman is currently working on a book about his experiences in the film and television industries, and plans to write a second book about his transition from the studio to sermons.

He said it was ironic that his education and training for a different career led him to the church.

"I went to a college that trained me for the stage and acting without the microphone in your ear," he said. "I had to learn how to project my voice. It's clear to me now why I can speak to such large crowds. It's sort of like God knew what I was going to do with my life, when I was preparing for something else."



The Rev. Peter Ackerman is interviewed at St. John's Episcopal Church on Wednesday.