

# Bewitching BELIEF

*Reverend Gina Pond,  
a Wiccan priest and  
Christian pastor,  
conjures inclusivity in  
all aspects of her life*

BY ELAINE K. HOWLEY  
PHOTOS BY MIKE CALABRO

**I**n William Shakespeare's time, witches were something to fear. "Macbeth," one of his best-known plays, includes a coven of three "weyward sisters," or witches, cooking a steaming brew of awfulness to work their dark arts. "Double, double, toil and trouble; / Fire burn and cauldron bubble," he wrote.

In those days, suspected witches were often "ducked," or tied up and thrown into a river. If they floated, that proved their status as a witch and they'd be jailed or hanged. If they sank, they'd be proven innocent but would likely drown in the process. A lose-lose situation if ever there was one.

Thankfully, this ducking (also called cucking or swimming) of witches went out of vogue after the Enlightenment swept across Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, and today, we tolerate a somewhat greater range of religious expression than Shakespeare's contemporaries did.

But even if they didn't, Gina Pond, a Wiccan-Christian priest and pastor, would survive. Not just because the 41-year-old unattached member of the Illinois LMSC is a



Gina Pond, an unattached member of the Illinois LMSC, left a career in the corporate world to become a Wiccan priest and Christian pastor.



Gina Pond has swum for much of her life and hopes to compete in a future Big Shoulders open water swim in Chicago.



tough woman, but also because she's a swimmer and she's not afraid of open water.

## A Swimming Witch

Pond grew up in a Catholic household in Nashua, N.H., and says she was always in the water, though she never joined a swim team. Pools and lakes all over the Granite State were her favorite places, and her mother referred to her as her "little fish."

Around the time she would have been confirmed, her mom gave her the option of either continuing with Catholicism or learning about other traditions. "I decided to do my own thing," she says. She soon came across literature about witchcraft and, although she found it interesting, she says it didn't stick.

Fast-forward to her senior year at Elmira College in New York when she stumbled on the book "The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess" by Starhawk, a neo-paganist writer. It struck a chord with her. When she began working in 1998, she joined a local coven to delve deeper into what she'd read. Pond eventually achieved third-degree status

as a Wiccan, a designation signifying a higher level of mastery and her leadership role in the community.

Wicca is a witchcraft religion founded by author and anthropologist Gerald Gardner in the United Kingdom in the 1940s, Pond says, one that involves magic and spells. Wiccans also use tarot cards and conduct rituals and sacred rites to honor various deities, particularly those that relate to the seasons and the earth. Witchcraft and paganism have ancient roots, but the modern movement Gardner launched combines elements of Druidic and Celtic practices, aspects of freemasonry, and ceremonial magic.

But don't think Pond is about to hop on a broomstick and take off in search of eye of newt or wing of bat under the hazy glow of an ominous October moon. "I'm also a Christian pastor and I have a master's degree in divinity," she says. "That means I both believe in a lot of the witchcraft stuff and I also believe in other deities than the Christian God. But I also believe in Jesus."

Pond concedes some people think her belief in deities beyond the accepted pantheon of

Christianity means she simply can't be a Christian, but she thinks these two philosophies can work in harmony.

## A Leap of Faith

Soon after she graduated from college, Pond dived deeper into her studies of Wicca while holding down a corporate job. She worked for about 13 years as a biochemist doing quality-control analysis for FDA-related testing for drugs and gene therapies. But she says she burned out in 2011 and decided to move on.

"I knew at the time I was a pretty good biochemist and a good quality-control person, but I knew I could be a much better priest," she says. "My wife said to me one day, 'You can always change your life and do something different.' And she was right. You can always reinvent yourself. So I did. I applied for seminary and got in." She says quitting her job was scary, but she hasn't looked back since.

When Pond enrolled in the Pacific School of Religion, an ecumenical seminary in Berkeley, Calif., she thought she might become a hospital chaplain. But

about halfway through her first year, she realized that she was not only a Wiccan-Christian but was called to do education and pastoral work. "That surprised me at the time," she says. "But looking back, it really does fit with a lot of my personality and how I work with people."

To earn her divinity degree, Pond completed interfaith work and a rigorous three-year academic program. "It's a very involved program [with] a lot of classes in theology and pastoral care," she says. "You also learn a lot more about your own personal theology and personal ideas."

Upon graduation in 2014, Pond launched a weekly podcast called "This Week in Heresy" and began writing, blogging, and ministering to others. Pond co-founded the Circle of Cerridwen, the founding coven of the Open Source Alexandrian tradition, with her wife, Sarah Thompson, who's also a third-degree witch. They champion inclusivity, particularly around the subjects of gender, gender identity, and the body.

## The Cult of the Body

Issues of the body and sexual identity are central to Pond, who's written extensively on the topic, spearheading with Thompson a book project examining attitudes about gender and transgender issues in the modern pagan community. Pond says she sees parallels here between the swimming and spiritual spheres. "A lot of transgender people can't go swimming because of their suits and bodies, so we try to do a lot of body positivity," she says. "I feel like it's important. If you're being told that your body is wrong in society overall and in your spiritual community," you're not going to end up in a healthy frame of mind.

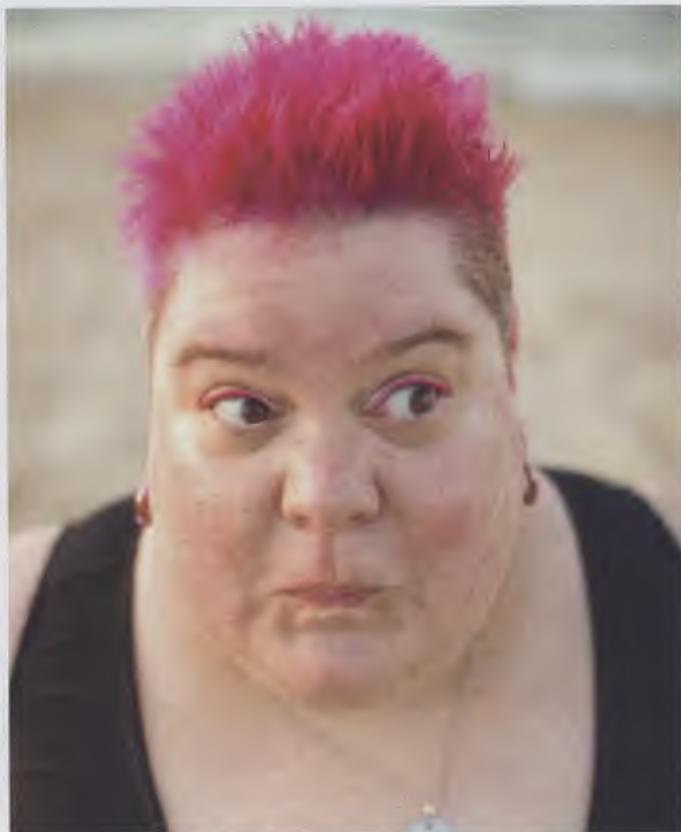
Pond herself has experi-

enced the pain of feeling rejected by others based on how she looks. Although she's a regular lap swimmer, logging about 500 yards per session a few times a week, with longer swims scattered across the month, depending on her schedule, she says she's never really connected with a Masters program—partly because the times don't match with her schedule, but also because of concerns over how she, as a self-described "fat woman," will be received. "I have anxiety about it," she says. "In a lot of pictures they post on the website and videos, they don't really show people my size."

What's more, deciding what to wear is challenging. "Finding actual training swimwear is kind of a nightmare," she says, rattling off a list of sartorial insults includ-

ing cumbersome swim skirts, extra padding in the chest that absorbs water, and a lack of racing-cut suits in her size. She says any suits she buys usually need to be tailored, and even then, they tend to be better suited to lounging by the pool with a drink than grinding out laps. "I think that's part of the reason why I feel anxiety about going to a Masters event. I'm a big woman, and I don't know how people will react to me swimming," she says. "When you get swimwear that doesn't fit right, it adds to that anxiety because you're not comfortable in that suit you're in."

In her quest for a better suit, Pond says she has found Size Queen Clothing, a custom clothing company that makes swimsuits that have helped her enjoy swimming more.



Gina Pond co-founded the Circle of Cerridwen and champions inclusivity regarding the subjects of gender, gender identity, and body image.

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## Spirituality of Swimming

There are some other connections between Pond's spiritual life and her swimming life, of a more positive and sacred variety. She talks about the serenity that can come from time spent in the water, especially open water.

"There's nothing quite like swimming in the ocean or a lake and just letting the rest of the world fall away," she says. "There's a lot of spirituality to that because I feel like I'm being held up by the water and the Earth." She says floating on a calm surface and looking up at the sky with ears plugged by the water is a wonderful way to connect with the earth and her deities.

"One of my most memorable spiritual experiences was at a beach in New England," she says, recounting a night swim. "There was no one else around,

but I went out beyond the breakers and was swimming around and looking up at the stars. I looked down and there was phosphorescence in the water. That was one of those moments when the spirit and the earth and I were all in alignment. It was at a moment where a lot of change happened after that, and it was quite amazing."

Pond says she became more serious about open water swimming about eight years ago. "I'd been swimming off and on my whole life and thought maybe I should do this Tiburon thing," she says, referring to the Tiburon Mile, a high-level open water race held annually in the San Francisco Bay. If you want to see an example of pure joy of accomplishment, watch the video that Thompson posted on YouTube after the event. It shows Pond going from nervous newbie to elated finisher.

Pond says that joy came from affirming what she suspected she could do, but didn't have a lot of support from others in pursuing. "It was partly to prove to myself that I could do it and partly because I wanted to show my doctor," she says. "As a fat woman, you always get the, 'Oh, well, you should lose weight or exercise more.' So I said, 'If you want me to exercise more, I'm going to swim the Tiburon Mile.'"

Although a back injury has prevented Pond from completing a second Tiburon Mile and a recent move to Chicago has meant a major shift in her routine, she hopes to continue swimming. She wants to compete at Big Shoulders, an annual open water race in Chicago, in the not-too-distant future.

Pond is also working on a mystic fiction novel as she continues offering counseling and

spiritual-direction services to her flock via various blogs and websites. What's more, she and Thompson plan to start a new covenant later this year.

Pond may achieve all of this and more with perhaps a little help from the spirit world as she gives offerings to deities who can help her along her journey, a process she says is not dissimilar from simple prayer, working toward a fitness goal, or setting an intention in meditation or yoga. No matter what you believe, Pond points to the universality of needing a bit of support now and again in whatever form works for you. "If I need to get some motivation to do my writing, or I need extra energy to feel better, or I want to get through this swim, or I want to be better than my last swim," she says, a magic spell and a commitment of her own spiritual energy just might do the trick. ■

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