

# Assemblies of God Pastor Says Yoga Has 'Demonic Roots.'

ALISSA ZHU | SPRINGFIELD NEWS-LEADER | 11:01 am CST November 13, 2018

New research found that listening to yoga music before bed might help prevent fatal heart attacks.

A pastor of an Assemblies of God megachurch recently took aim at yoga, saying it has "demonic roots" and warning Christians to avoid the popular activity.

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Pastor John Lindell told the attendees of James River Church in Ozark — which has a congregation of about 10,500, according to a 2016 report — that the positions in yoga were "created with demonic intent to open you up to demonic power because Hinduism is demonic."

## **Members of Springfield's yoga community are now speaking out.**

A Christian yogi says his practice has brought him closer to God and wants others to know that it's possible to do sun salutations while following Christ. One owner of a yoga studio said she's worried that small local businesses are being hurt. An instructor, feeling on edge after a Florida yoga studio was shot up last week, can't shake a fear that someone might take the church's anti-yoga message too far.

They are taking a stand against the sermon's message, which they say is "ignorant" and divisive, in a time when unity is needed.

"Yoga transcends religion," said Reggie Harris, who said five years of yoga has transformed his life. "Yoga brings people together in a heart of unity and love. You're teaching people to hate something that may help them physically, emotionally, spiritually."

**Sermon: Yoga as "paranormal"**

Lindell delivered a paranormal-themed sermon the Sunday ahead of Halloween.

Among other things, he warned congregants about the spiritual dangers of fortune-telling, Wicca, a form of paganism, and finally, yoga.

People might be shocked that the church was comparing yoga to the paranormal, Lindell acknowledged.

"That, to me, is an indication of how far our society has drifted into a post-Christian culture. Earlier, it would have been a given that yoga was inherently a form of eastern mysticism that Christians should absolutely avoid, but that is no longer the case," he said during the sermon.

Yoga is everywhere now, he said, pointing to the local YMCA's class schedule as an example.

Lindell explained that yoga's intent is to "raise and expand consciousness for the purpose of experiencing peace, energy and divine presence."

**First, he addressed yoga poses.**

"They were designed, they were created with demonic intent, to open you up to demonic power because Hinduism is demonic," Lindell said.

According to the government of India's Ministry of External Affairs, yoga does not adhere to any particular religion or belief system.

Lindell said the sun salutation, a common sequence of positions in yoga, is meant to worship Surya, the Hindu sun god.

"To say the positions of yoga are no more than exercise are tantamount to saying water baptism is just aqua aerobics," Lindell said.

**Then, he talked about meditation.**

During meditation, he said, people clear their minds. Sometimes they chant a mantra, which can incorporate the names of Hindu gods, Lindell said.

He said it's "spiritually dangerous" for people to empty their minds.

"Yoga is diametrically opposed to Christianity," he said. "...Christians should stay away from yoga because of its demonic roots."

Lindell said he was coming from a place of concern for people's spiritual well-being.

Stop doing yoga, he told his congregants, and they don't have to be afraid.

"I can't say the same if you keep doing it," Lindell said.

Yogis respond

Last Monday morning, only one person showed up to Heather Worthy's yoga class. Her night class only had four people.

At the Republic gym where she teaches, the words "yoga classes" used to be featured on the front door. By Monday, those words had been taken down, even though she's still leading yoga classes.

Worthy said many people at the gym are active members of James River Church, and she speculated that Lindell's sermon had an impact on them.

"It hurt," she said. "It could have been a coincidence, but it's interesting."

Worthy said some points that Lindell made about yoga made her chuckle.

"But at the same time, it's so frustrating .... the whole thing is quite ludicrous to me."

Worthy, who once worked at a church as a staff member, said in her experience, Christianity is "love-based."

"How can attack and cause harm if you are acting out of love? Especially toward a group of people or a practice that you don't understand... blatantly calling it wrong, and saying 'You're going to hell?'" she asked. "That doesn't fit my definition of love."

Yoga classes in travel hot spots

Worthy said yoga is a necessary part of her life. A severe car accident in 2013 left her with mobility issues and chronic pain in her back. She tried physical therapy, acupuncture and prescription pain relievers and muscle relaxers.

She didn't like how the medication made her feel.

"I'm a mom of two. I have a busy schedule and I don't have time to be a zombie," Worthy said.

What made the biggest difference was daily yoga.

"If I don't have a regular (yoga) practice, I can't function. I can't get out of bed, really," she said.

Worthy urged others to "find your truth" and not take other people's statements at face value without more research.

Stephanie Wubbena owns Live Pure Yoga in Springfield and runs Goats and Yoga out of her Rogersville farm. She said Springfield has a "robust" yoga scene, which is reaching the peak of its popularity.

There are at least 15 yoga studios in Springfield, the News-Leader found after an online search.

Stephanie Wubbena leads the class during Goats and Yoga on Herding Dogs Farm in Rogersville on Saturday, May 19, 2018.

Wubbena made a rebuttal video to the James River Sermon about yoga and posted it to YouTube on Nov. 1. It's received about 500 views as of Friday.

Wubbena told the News-Leader her main concern is that the sermon is "going after small businesses."

"This is our sole source of livelihood," Wubbena said. "One yoga studio lost over 10 members the Monday after the sermon."

Wubbena agreed with Lindell on one aspect: that yoga has "pagan origins," she said.

But so do Christmas and Easter traditions, Wubbena said.

"The blatant hypocrisy was just so overwhelming," she said.

Like Worthy, Wubbena said people should think for themselves.

"In this political air that we have, it's really important to not be caught up in tribalism and not be caught up with listening to just because someone is a Christian or Democrat or Republican, to just do what they want," Wubbena said. "...Look some stuff up, don't be scared and intimidated and blindly follow, because all men are fallible."

Reggie Harris had plenty of aches and pains from his days as a Mississippi State University, then as a semi-professional football player.

He began practicing yoga five years ago to alleviate tightness in his back and hip muscles — the result of old dislocations of his hip and shoulders.

Harris said yoga has helped with more than just physical ailments. Emotionally, he said he's less angry and less insecure.

For the 36-year-old, who grew up "old school Baptist," yoga has a deep spiritual side as well.

"I know my relationship with the Lord and my relationship with him has gotten deeper through yoga,"

Harris said. "...It took me to a whole new level. It made me open my mind up and question things. It made me look at things from other people's perspectives a whole lot

more, and it made me search differently for answers, deepening my relationship with God."

Harris said he felt "disappointed, hurt and angry" when he listened to Lindell's sermon online.

"When you start spreading venom like that, that's when it becomes toxic," Harris said. "Because people start making assumptions about people who practice yoga. You think they're evil, demonic. That's the same rhetoric we created about Muslims in America .... That's not right. That's not bringing peace."

Harris said people should judge a "tree by the fruit it bears."

"I looked at how yoga helped a lot of poor people, people who were sick on the inside, had physical illness. I gave it a try. These are all the positive fruits of yoga," he said.

Doing yoga with goats is way more about the goats than the yoga, and it's so joyful, you'll feel the therapeutic benefits immediately.

Amanda Davis, who has been a yoga instructor for 12 years, said the pastor didn't have a proper understanding of yoga.

"Yoga doesn't prescribe to any religion, and I don't think people understand that so they get false ideas about it," she said.

On Nov. 2, a gunman opened fire at a Florida yoga studio and killed two women and injured five other people before shooting himself.

The gunman espoused misogynistic and racist views in online videos and had a history of inappropriately grabbing women.

It has put Davis on edge.

"It's really... scary," Davis said. "I don't really know if somebody is going to walk into the Y, and shoot us up, or one of the other studios we teach."

When Davis began practicing yoga 13 years ago, the public's attitude toward yoga was different.

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People started out a little apprehensive about it because it was new to the area," she said. "People didn't understand it. As people would show up and take the class, maybe do a little bit of research on their own, they realize it is not a religion — it's a way of life. (It teaches you) to be a better person, to be charitable and to be mindful of your environment and the people around you."

Davis said yoga has made her life "a whole lot better."

"It helped me, not only physically, but emotionally as well — to be a more balanced individual and be more at harmony with my surroundings and people in my community."

Davis said, in her opinion, the best thing to do is to ignore the people who denigrate yoga as "demonic."

"It's ignorant," she said. "It's hate speech."

Toward the end of his sermon about the paranormal, Pastor Lindell said he hopes people consider his words.

"I don't do it to make anybody mad. If I made you mad, that's unfortunate," he said. "But I have a responsibility before God as the shepherd of souls to say I told you the truth."

The audience broke out into applause.

In response to a News-Leader request for comment, James River Church provided a written statement.

The full statement is as follows:

"As a church our heart is to provide people with Biblical insight and teaching that will strengthen their faith and their daily walk with God.

"We would encourage anyone who wants to know what was said in Pastor John's sermon "Haunted: Pursuing the Paranormal" to watch the message available at <https://jamesriver.org/sermon/haunted-pursuing-the-paranormal> .

"The James River Church App includes additional resources for further study on the topic."