

New leader steps up to the pulpit

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer

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WESTHAMPTON - When Tadd Allman-Morton was first interviewed for the open pastor position at Westhampton United Church of Christ, the Search Committee asked him to pray over the phone.

"I've never prayed over the phone before," said Allman-Morton, 40. "I don't remember what I said except that it was about helping us to figure out if we were right for each other on some level."

The committee also asked him which books he was reading. He looked around his bedroom and noted a book on theology, a history book and "Open Up and Bleed," a biography on Iggy Pop, a punk-rock singer and songwriter.

"That really tickled them," Allman-Morton said. "I know that they liked it because they actually mentioned it to someone who was a member of Northampton First Churches and that person mentioned it to me."

At the time, Westhampton UCC was seeking a new pastor for its 250-member congregation, which officially voted for Allman-Morton on Nov. 4. He is slated to begin his ministry on Dec. 2. Allman-Morton was one of 12 pastors interviewed for about 1½ hours via phone. On the other end of the phone line was the Search Committee, which consisted of six church members - Fletcher Nehring, Ruth Bishop, Anita Hickey, Kevin O'Keefe, Stephanie Dalton and Carolyn Coggins. The committee, which gathered in the church and put Morton on speaker phone for his first interview, began their search about 2½ years ago, when the Interim Rev. Quentin Chin took over after the settled minister stepped down.

The committee began its search viewing nearly 60 minister profiles, which covers each applicant's background, theological perspectives and personal evaluation of skills. Each profile is 20 to 25 pages long, and provided by the Massachusetts Conference United Church of Christ.

"We read so many profiles and we did it carefully," said Hickey, a member of the Search Committee and a member of the church for more than 40 years. "It took us a lot of time. I grew up as a Catholic and we were never allowed to be involved in a lot of things. This process gives us freedom to see what's important to the community and it gives us part of the sharing in all of this. We got to know the people on the committee and it was a very positive experience."

In addition to the profile, an audiotaped sermon was given to the committee, Nehring said.

"I liked the fact that he (Allman-Morton) smiled a lot and liked to laugh," Nehring said. "We thought his sermon was very thought-provoking. He brought in some personal stories and tied it to normal, everyday life, so the normal Joe Shmoe could relate to his stories. One of the things

people want is a sermon that they can listen to that will lift them up and carry them through the week and we found that with his sermons."

The next step in the search process was a face-to-face interview, which took nearly three hours. Allman-Morton met the committee in Westhampton and was given a tour of the church. After the face-to-face interview, Allman-Morton led a neutral pulpit service at First Churches on Main Street in Northampton.

"He's a very dynamic speaker," said Kevin O'Keefe. "Rev. Peter Ives at First Churches was very impressed and actually told us 'that's the best sermon that I've heard preached on that particular Gospel in many years.' It was very evident during his sermon that the entire congregation was really paying attention to what he was saying. You could see it and you could feel it."

After spending about eight hours talking with and listening to Allman-Morton, the Search Committee checked his references. O' Keefe spoke with the Rev. Nancy Taylor, pastor at Old South Church in Boston, where Morton served as interim pastor. Taylor, former president of Massachusetts United Church of Christ, spoke about Allman-Morton's theology, preaching and style, O' Keefe said.

Throughout the search process and recommendation-checking, "you begin to develop a real good solid picture about who that is person is and how they'll fit into your church," O' Keefe said. "I tried to get a general sense from her and the things he had done at Old South. I felt very confident in talking to her that this was the person we were looking for."

And Allman-Morton said Westhampton UCC is the church he was looking to serve.

"First and foremost what drives me to the church is that it reminds me of family," said Allman-Morton, who grew up in Stowe, Vt., and worked for a time as a produce manager for a health food store. "I feel like I can really be who I am and that's key. What was great about this church is they really seemed to want someone who has a joy in being Christian. I think they were looking for somebody who speaks from the heart and that's what I do. They're dear, dear people. I'm just overwhelmed with how sweet they are, how kind they are."

Interim pastor leaves his mark

Interim Minister Quentin Chin will finish serving Westhampton UCC next Nov. 25. Since he joined Westhampton UCC in April 2005, the church has increased its pledges by nearly 33 percent, Chin said. Also, a change in Sunday School was made while Chin was there. Sunday School now starts at 9:15 a.m. before the 10 a.m. worship service, and is open to both children and adults, whereas before the worship service started at 10 and children would leave at 10:15 to attend Sunday School. Chin noted that he worked half-time, as opposed to the settled pastor's full-time schedule.

"In essence what has happened is the congregation has had to do more work on its own," Chin said. "So many people have stepped up to the plate to help the church."

Before coming to Westhampton, Chin worked at Southampton Congregational Church until February 2005. He is now speaking with another church about his future plans, he said. Chin said he enjoyed his time at Westhampton UCC.

"You come up to Westhampton, you drive around and you don't see much," Chin said. "There's Outlook Farm, a couple of horses and a dog trainer. But then you have this church and it's the only church in town. And there's so many people here who love this church. I mean really love this church. It is so central to the town and it's because its history has been so tightly intertwined. It's been really wonderful to work with all these people and I'm really excited for their future."

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