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Pastor finds his niche in life

by Charlotte Ferrell Smith
Daily Mail staff



Bob Wojcieszak

The Rev. Rafe Allison said he was a reluctant seminary student when he entered as a second career, but knew it was the right calling when he started pastoral care. He moved from North Dakota to Charleston to become pastor of St. Timothy Lutheran Church, where he'll be officially installed on Sunday.



Teresa Allison - wife of new St. Timothy Lutheran Church Pastor Rafe Allison.

The Rev. Rafe Allison was tentative about switching careers when he left his job as an industrial controls engineer to enter the seminary.

He has been a pastor for 12 years now and can't imagine doing anything else.

"My greatest joy is pastoral care," he said. "That is where I feel used in a good way."

Allison, 50, is the new pastor of St. Timothy Lutheran Church, filling the post formerly held by the Rev. Richard Mahan, who retired Jan. 15.

Allison came to Charleston from Devils Lake, N.D., where he had served as pastor since 2005. His first sermon at St. Timothy was Jan. 22, and he'll officially be installed during Sunday's 10:30 a.m. service with Bishop John Bradosky.

Allison, who grew up in Asheville, N.C., attended the University of North Carolina and Wake Technical College before beginning his engineering career.

"I was working at a paper mill in North Carolina," he said. "God kept sending people to bug me about going to seminary. I was just an average parishioner who attended church. I struggled with it for close to a year. I finally said 'OK, God, I'll fill out the paper work. If it's not right, please stop it.'"

He entered Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, S.C., when he was 38. "I threw myself into academics," he said. "I was still uncomfortable with the call. After the first year I had a clinical pastoral experience."

He was assigned to work with Hospice and also spent time in the emergency room of a large medical center. While working with people in crisis, he realized he had found his niche.

"Halfway through, I knew this is what I wanted to do," he said of becoming a minister. He loves serving families in times of joy and offering comfort during times of sorrow. He does not like conflict.

In 2009, controversy rocked the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America when delegates at the national convention passed policies regarding gay and lesbian clergy and recognizing same-sex marriage. Previously, gay clergy members could serve as pastors only as long as they pledged to remain celibate.

St. Timothy was among 18 congregations to leave the organization and form the North American Lutheran Church, a body that has grown to include more than 300 congregations. The church Allison served in North Dakota also voted to leave the organization during this trying time.

Allison told his congregation at the time he was called to be their pastor and would answer their questions without making his personal feelings part of the discussion. While he loves all people, he said the decision boiled down to a Biblical matter and "not a Rafe decision."

St. Timothy is a vibrant congregation with an average attendance of 350 during Sunday worship and programs for all ages. Many families with young children attend.

Allison and his wife, Teresa, a Microsoft certified software engineer, are the parents of Eaven, a 13-year-old eighth-grader at John Adams Middle School.

Allison is still getting settled in his office at St. Timothy, where he is surrounded by books. He has a ready smile, an easygoing demeanor and a gift for conversing. He said his family has been warmly welcomed and he believes St. Timothy will be a good fit.

He looks forward to working with the congregation as a team.

He notes that being a pastor does not necessarily mean being out front leading.

Sometimes a minister is the one in the back offering a nudge when needed.

Regular service times are 10:30 a.m. Sunday and 7 p.m. Wednesday. The church telephone number is 304-343-0424. The church is located at 900 Lawndale Lane off Corridor G.

A covered dish dinner will follow Sunday's installation service.

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