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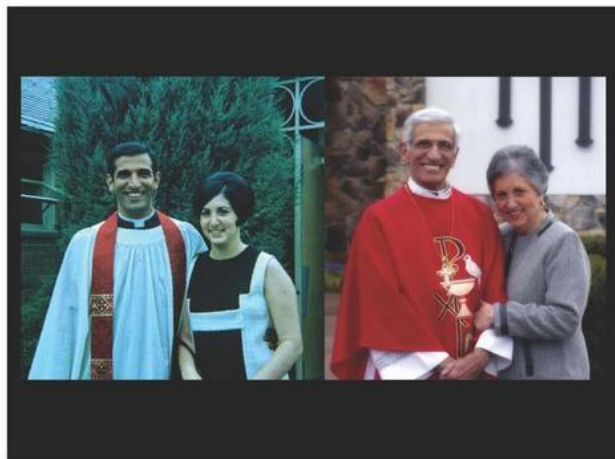
Pastor ends career built on love

by Charlotte Ferrell Smith
Daily Mail staff



Tom Hindman

The Rev. Richard Mahan, 72, will retire in January after serving as pastor of St. Timothy Lutheran Church for 40 years of his 44-year career as a minister.



Mahan and his wife, Donna Jean, are shown on the day of his ordination in one photo and again in a more recent shot. Throughout his ministry, she has been supportive and worked behind the scenes.



The Rev. Richard Mahan, pastor of St. Timothy Lutheran Church for four decades, once took his call to ministry a year at a time.

But he fell in love with pastoral duties, caring for people and spreading the gospel. At age 72, he has decided to retire and pursue a slower pace that will allow more time for family, traveling and hobbies.

"I do a lot of different things," he said. "I do stained glass and different craft things. I want to hang out at the beach in Florida and do whatever I want to do."

His office bookshelves have been emptied in preparation for his official retirement date of Jan. 15. He is leaving his post, but not the church where he will become a member of the congregation.

During his years at St. Timothy, he has done 467 baptisms, performed 295 wedding ceremonies and spoken at 251 funerals. He has loved serving families during times of joy and offering comfort during times of sorrow. He's done lots of counseling.

"I've seen lives turned around and marriages healed," he said. "I've talked to people who have lost a loved one. We (the church) are supposed to take care of widows, orphans and children."

His ministry has been based on love as well as taking a stand when he deemed it necessary. In 2009, controversy rocked the national body when leaders of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America voted to remove a ban on gay clergy and also to recognize gay marriage within the church. Mahan said he loved all people but felt these decisions did not reflect the word of God.

St. Timothy was one of 18 congregations to leave the ELCA and form the North American Lutheran Church, a body that has grown to include more than 300 congregations.

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.

"We are liturgical with blended music, contemporary and traditional," he said. "The average age is 35, and we have lots of activities."

A winding path led Mahan to ministry.

He grew up in Charleston where his Lebanese father ran a grocery and his family attended St. George Orthodox Church. He graduated from Charleston High School in 1957 and then went to San Francisco where his brother was an attorney. He first went to San Francisco State and planned to become a doctor. His brother, a Lutheran, invited him to a Billy Graham crusade.

"I went forward and made a commitment to Jesus Christ," Mahan said. "I wanted to go to a Christian college and transferred to Pacific Lutheran University. During my senior year, I felt a calling to the ministry. I started wrestling with the Lord. Then I got drafted during Vietnam and went into the preventive medicine corps."

During his time of military service, he continued to struggle with the idea of seminary.

In order to enter the program without waiting an entire additional year, he would have to be discharged from the military 21 days early.

"President Johnson was thinking of extending us for a year," Mahan said.

He put the matter in God's hands with prayer saying if he was meant to go to seminary that he would see an early discharge as a sign. He was discharged exactly 21 days early. He arrived in uniform at Trinity Lutheran Seminary.

"I registered and started my first year," he said. "I thought I would try it for a year. It was very academic. Then I went the second year. I still wasn't sure. By my senior year, I thought I might as well get a degree."

His first congregation was in Jersey City where he and his new wife, Donna Jean, lived in one of the worst parts of town. "We lived in the 'hood."

However, he was never afraid. He got involved in the community where everyone knew him. On a 2 a.m. hospital call, he donned his clerical collar and headed out without a concern for safety.

He had been there four years when the bishop called about a position at St. Timothy Lutheran Church in Charleston. Membership had dwindled to 40. If the congregation did not grow within a two-year period, the church would be closed.

The church continued to grow over the years until the building was stretched beyond capacity and there was not adequate parking. The church went through some expansion projects and was eventually sold to neighboring Thomas Hospital for \$3.5 million.

The congregation looked throughout the Kanawha Valley for a new site and eventually settled on a piece of land along Corridor G. The congregation moved into the new facility at 900 Lawndale Lane, where the first service was held Nov. 21, 2004.

On Jan. 15, Mahan will deliver his final sermon as pastor of St. Timothy. The Rev. Rafe Allison, who is coming from North Dakota, will step into the pulpit Jan. 22.

Mahan and his wife will head for Florida for a couple of months and spend time on the beach as well as with their adult children who live there. Kristi Mahan works for the Miami Heat basketball team. Brent Mahan sells real estate.

Mahan is looking forward to a new chapter in his life as he savors many memories of caring for people as a pastor.

"I'm a people person," he said. "I love people. I gave 100 percent of myself to caring for people. Over 44 years of ministry, I just thank God for the ride. It's been wonderful."

Sunday school at St. Timothy Lutheran Church is 9:15 a.m. followed by worship at 10:30. Wednesday service is 7 p.m. The church telephone number is 304-343-0424.

Contact writer Charlotte Ferrell Smith.