

Rev. Tom Richard comes out of retirement to lead the Methodist Church

By Brian Bushard
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Tom Richard knew he wanted to be a minister when he was 10 years old, watching his father give sermons at the First Congregational Church. The pews were full. Richard was mesmerized.

Thirty years later, in 1986, he followed in his father's footsteps, becoming minister at the church himself, where he stayed for 15 years. Now, he has the same calling at the pulpit of the Nantucket United Methodist Church.

"I've been a minister all my life and I never wanted to be anything else," said Richard, who started at the Methodist Church last week.

"I decided to be a minister when I was 10 years old. My mom had just died and my dad moved us here and I had an amazing experience that confirmed for me I needed to be a minister. I never dreamt I would come back in his footsteps."

Two months ago, Richard heard the Methodist Church was looking for a new minister, after several had come and gone after serving a little more than a year each. Richard signed up. It's a one-year position, but Richard is hoping to extend it into something much longer. What the church needs now, he said, is a familiar face for support, for a minister to offer guidance and advice for a congregation both during services and outside the church. What it needs, he said, is consistency.

"Having seen interim ministers, you see that they are just that. It's interim," Richard said. "The congregation knows you're not staying and that's got to be disheartening. The longevity of a minister is the single strongest prospect that the church will grow."

The idea to bring that consistency to the Methodist Church sprung partly out of the work Richard did after he left the Congregational Church. He traveled the country, serving as an interim minister for large churches looking for a fill-in minister, as well as churches that were struggling to attract and maintain a congregation.

It's the same struggle he sees at the Methodist Church on Centre Street.

"I've been to the large churches," he said. "I've enjoyed them for everything they are for their congregations, but I felt called to find out more about what was going on for the Methodist Church. They've had a decline in membership. They've had such a struggle."



Photo by Nicole Harnishfeger

Built in 1821 at the corner of Liberty and Centre streets during the height of Nantucket's dominance in the global whaling industry, the Methodist Church was once full. But like other churches nationwide, it has seen its membership dwindle. Today it has one of the smallest congregations on the island.



Rev. Tom Richard spent 15 years, from 1985-2000, as minister of Nantucket's First Congregational Church.

The Methodist Church is not entirely new to Richard. Over the past year, he's led Sunday services when former pastor Al Maloney was out of town, the most recent on Christmas Eve.

But Richard said it wasn't always difficult for the Methodist Church to bring people in. He pointed to a time in the late 1990s when he would watch the late Rev. Nancy Nelson lead services. Nelson, who grew up summers on the island, was Nantucket's Methodist minister from 1995 until her retirement in 2010 and built a diverse congregation. She died in 2013.

What Nelson accomplished, he said, was a revival of the church's membership. There was something to the compassion she had, and the longevity of her service at the same church, that gave congregants a sense of support and a sense of belonging, Richard said.

Now he hopes to bring that same support and dedication back.

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— Rev. Tom Richard
Minister,
Methodist Church

"I'm appointed for a year and as long as my health is good and I'm making strides, it could be longer than a year, and I would hope so," Richard said. "If they need anything here, they need consistency. They need a pastor who's here, who's staying here, who's active in the community."

Richard looks at the opportunity as a return of sorts. It's a return to ministerial work on the island. It's a reminder of the time he would watch his father give sermons down the street at the First Congregational Church, sitting in the pews with his 22 brothers and sisters.

Richard was ordained in his mid-20s, and received a doctorate in ministry several years later. He's the only sibling of the 23 to follow his father into ministry. But Richard never thought about an alternative profession. It was always ministry.

"I love pastoral work," he said. "I love being a pastor to a congregation. You get into their lives, there's an intimacy to it."