

The Rev. Alison Beth Miller has taken over leadership of the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, and her goal is to unify all generations of the congregation.

MORRIS TWP., October 2, 2005 -- The Rev. Alison Beth Miller doesn't know quite how to sum up the way she feels before she goes before her congregation to preach.

Even though she uses the word nervous, she says it's more like excitement. A good kind.

"I always get nervous before I preach, in the sense that I get an adrenaline rush because I know what a gift it is to be able to share my piece of the truth and wisdom I have with the congregation," Miller said. "I take it seriously."

What Miller does know for sure is that it is a feeling that she doesn't want to lose. When that happens, she said, it's time to quit--and at age 31, with only three weeks under her belt as the new minister of the Morristown Unitarian Fellowship, that's not a likely scenario.

Miller may be the youngest minister ever to lead the congregation, which accepts people from a broad range of religious denominations, beliefs and ideas. As the fellowship celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, she and the congregation are looking to head in a new direction.

Miller began operating behind the scenes at the church in early August before performing her first service for the congregation on Sept. 11. She will be formally installed as minister in November.

"I am just so excited to be here," Miller said. "Morristown has so many things going for it." Miller said she is hoping to build on the strengths of the fellowship -- an active base of congregants -- while also encouraging its growth, drawing younger people, and developing an intergenerational community.

Miller said she is taking over at a time when the beliefs of various religions, science and other ideas have clashed. She sees the fellowship's role as a model of how varied beliefs can, instead, coexist. "At this point I'm trying to determine what the most pressing social issues are for this community," Miller said.

Miller said she was attracted to the Morristown fellowship because of its strong lay leaders and a record of being active. "I just thought we had just barely tapped the potential to be a thriving, growing congregation," Miller said.

Tony Rutigliano, a member of the search committee that selected Miller, said the fellowship is counting on her to tap that potential. Rutigliano said the fellowship is hoping that Miller will be able to increase the number of congregants, which currently is about 280, as well as reach out to younger members and form intergenerational bonds. "Alison has a history of getting people re-involved," Rutigliano said. Miller, whose mother's family was Jewish and whose father's family was Episcopalian, was introduced as a child to diverse views.

"My parents raised me with exposures from both religious traditions, but at the same time spent a lot of time in a Unitarian Universalist congregation in New York City," Miller said.

Miller's appointment followed a two-year search to replace the former minister, the Rev. Paul Ratzlaff, who guided the congregation for 22 years. Rutigliano, a member of the search committee, said the committee used 30 focus groups and a survey of the church membership before outlining the attributes they sought in a new minister.

What followed was sifting through dozens of applications for the job, phone interviews and test sermons. None seemed to find the adequate support until Miller, he said.

"When we met her we just said, 'she is the one,'" Rutigliano said. The committee was impressed with Miller's hefty resume.

By the time Miller received her master of divinity degree from Harvard University, she already had founded a young adult group of 250 members at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City. While at Harvard, she worked at a young adult ministry for the Unitarian Universalist Association. She also served at All Souls Unitarian Church in Tulsa, Okla., as an intern minister for the congregation of more than 1,000 members and 600 children enrolled in the religious education program.

She last worked as an acting assistant minister at the Unitarian Church of All Souls in New York City, where she was a young adult and campus ministry trainer and workshop leader. Miller said that in those previous positions, she has worked mostly with youths, or with adults in their 20s and 30s, and has designed contemporary worship services to address those groups. One such service involved a video clip of one congregant's trip to the South, put to a rock soundtrack.

Miller's age and ability to connect with an elusive young age group both enticed and frightened the search committee. With many older congregants, some questioned whether Miller would be able to relate to their concerns, Rutigliano said.

"I was concerned that people might feel that way," Miller said. She notes that she had done pastoral care for people who ranged from their 60s to their 80s, and that she is seeking to unite congregants of all ages.

"For me, the commitment is to intergenerational ministry, and figuring out ways to bring out that rich perspective, as well as to minister to that diversity," Miller said.

"I have to say that (her age) was somewhat concerning, but she certainly has a depth to her soul," Rutigliano said. "She has been through some trying times." Miller survived a battle with a rare form of cancer that afflicted her as a high school upperclassman. It was in that struggle, she said, that the beginnings of her life as a minister began.

"Out of that experience, I had to find God as that healing power of love that breaks through the darkness of our world," Miller said. She found it in the kindness of others, who would visit her, donate blood and support her in her time of need.

"I am just so incredibly aware of what a gift that is every new day," Miller said.

Despite Miller's acumen and wisdom beyond her years, Rutigliano said the nine-day test period in which new ministers preach, live with the congregation and attend social functions was somewhat sleepless.

The concern ended, though, when Miller received unanimous approval, not only from the seven-member search committee but from the entire congregation.

"We've never been unanimous on anything in our lives," Rutigliano said.

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