

Coming home

After years away from his home in Minnesota, Johnson takes seat in St. Paul

By JONAS M. WALKER

Rep. Jeff Johnson (R-Plymouth) is a man whose travels, ancestry, and faith have shaped his understanding.



Rep. Jeff Johnson

The new representative cites two particular places as key to bringing him where he is today — the first, like many Minnesotans, is the land of his ethnic ancestry, Norway.

Johnson said that ancestry informs his views of government. He sums

those up as “self-sufficiency, hard work, and the limited scope and reach of government.”

After growing up in Detroit Lakes, Johnson enrolled in Concordia College in Moorhead, where he earned a bachelor’s degree in economics. He then attained a law degree from Georgetown University in Washington D.C., his second life-defining location; significant because it enhanced his appreciation of home.

“I missed the Midwest,” Johnson explained. “Three years was enough.” So, the newly anointed lawyer returned as far west as Chicago, where he began working at business litigation in a large firm.

After a number of years, he returned to Minnesota, settling in the Twin Cities and beginning work for Cargill, a major corporation with interests ranging from agriculture to manufacturing. Johnson said he enjoys the job in part because he can get out and “meet the people who actually make money for the company, not just those of us who sit behind desks and push paper. It gives me a better perspective on life.”

Johnson says his experience with employment litigation has prepared him for functioning in the House. Citing the importance of discernment and judgment, Johnson says that, in his Cargill position, he “gets to hear a lot of interesting things that may or may not be happening.”

He plans on remaining with Cargill during the session, and returning full-time after the House adjourns in the spring.

Johnson assumes the seat most recently occupied by former Rep. Henry Todd Van Dellen (R-Plymouth), a fellow Republican who decided not to seek re-election. Johnson now represents a district composed of western Minneapolis suburbs and smaller cities in Hennepin County. Although he says his district “leans Republican,” he faced strong opposition from Dorothy Muffett, whom he characterized as a moderate Democrat.

Johnson says he ran on the issues of education and “fiscal conservatism.” He explains that

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he was first motivated to run when his son was born three years ago.

“After our little boy was born, I realized how hard it is to raise a child,” he said. “It’s tough to raise a child in Minnesota, in the United States. And I realized that is directly related to legislation.”

Elaborating, Johnson said tax burdens contribute to the already difficult job of parenting. Taxes “make it harder for parents to do what they feel is right with their children,” he said.

Specifically, Johnson would like to “eliminate entirely” the Profile of Learning, which, along with the basic skills tests, comprise the state’s graduation standards measuring the performance of public school students. Johnson favors replacing that system with what he characterizes as an “input system,” in which the state demands relatively few skills and leaves the actual work of curriculum development to local school boards, teachers, and especially parents.

Although he says he came in bearing the frustration of parents regarding K-12 funding and governance, Johnson admits he has a lot to learn.

“I thought I knew a lot. I didn’t,” he said. “It’s a fairly steep learning curve” just to understand the way Minnesota funds primary education. “It has become so complex, it’s ridiculous,” he says. He hopes to make the system more accessible to average citizens.

His other top priority is to bring the principles of fiscal conservatism to bear on all areas of legislation. “Taxpayers should get back every penny of the budget surplus,” he said. “Individuals and families can make much better decisions about spending money and educating their kids than a bunch of bureaucrats in St. Paul can.”

He expressed his frustration with what he sees as “a mentality from both sides of the aisle that the people’s money belongs first to the government, and only second to families and individuals.”

Johnson counts Ronald Reagan among his ideological heroes. More locally, he credits State Sen. Gen Olson (R-Minnetrista) as a mentor, saying her legislative behavior and ideas make her a role model in the Legislature.

Recalling his joy in litigation, Johnson also expressed his appreciation for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. “He doesn’t back down,” said Johnson.

But supporting it all is a key element of Johnson’s true personality: his faith. Johnson says his Lutheran faith is extremely important in his life. “It factors into every decision, every day,” he said.

DISTRICT 34B

1998 population (estimate): 38,036

Largest city: Plymouth

County: Hennepin

Location: Western Twin Cities suburbs

Top concern: “My most important priority is the elimination of the Profile of Learning.”

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