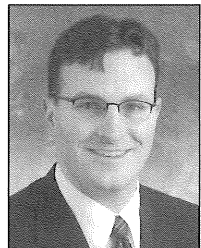


# Unlikely lawmaker

## From aspiring priest to city prosecutor, Lesch hopes to connect with constituents as new member of the House

By MICHELLE KIBIGER

Rep. John Lesch (DFL-St. Paul) says he never really imagined himself as a lawyer, or even a legislator. In fact, as a teen, he began studying to become a priest.



Rep. John Lesch

But a few key experiences in his life led him to the Minnesota House of Representatives and gave him a passion for public service.

He was initially drawn to the Legislature through an internship with former Rep. Andy Dawkins during the 1997-98 session. Lesch said he became fascinated with the legislative process and the commitment to public service that members exhibited, including Dawkins.

"He was not a typical legislator," Lesch said of Dawkins. "He had an idea and he ran with it, no matter what people thought of it."

Now Lesch says he's trying to employ the same principles in his new role as legislator. He has established two goals for this term: one successful piece of legislation addressing a need among his constituents, and meeting more residents of District 66A, which includes parts of north and east St. Paul.

"Many people don't feel connected to what's going on at the Capitol because they've never been asked what their opinion is," Lesch said. "And I tried to do that when I went out to hit the doors (last) summer. But that was before I was elected, too, so I want to get to know a lot more of the folks."

Lesch grew up in Brooklyn Park. When he was 17, he moved to Madison, Wisc. to attend Holy Name Seminary. During those formative years, Lesch said he learned some important values that he carries with him today.

He said he was always taught to be the kind of person who means what he says, says what he means, and is true to his word.

"If I say I'm going to do something, I (try to) follow through on it or break myself trying," he said. "And there are times that I haven't

followed through on it – just the guilt is overwhelming. Being raised that way is, I think, really important, because there's the perception that people like lawyers and politicians overpromise and underdeliver."

He said he hopes to reach a balance in that. Fellow freshman member Rep. Doug Meslow (R-White Bear Lake) has become a close colleague of Lesch's, whom Lesch says he enjoys bouncing ideas off of to get Meslow's conservative viewpoint, and to help hone the idea and refine it.

"I know that I can trust what he says, and when John tells me that's the way it is, then that's good enough for me," Meslow said.

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"I think John is going to be a star in the House – a bright guy who is very committed to what he is doing."

After seminary, Lesch said the order sent him to Saint Louis University to continue his studies. But after meeting and seriously dating the woman who would become his wife, Lesch decided not to continue pursuing the priesthood, and ultimately he returned to the Twin Cities to attend the Hamline University law school. Lesch and his wife, Tina, settled into an apartment near the Hamline campus. The couple now have a young daughter.

He said over the next several years they have chosen to stay in the neighborhood, moving about a half-mile east in each of their new residences.

"The district that he lived in and that he volunteered in and he got known in was the district he was elected in," Dawkins said.

Now a prosecutor with the city of St. Paul, the 30-year-old Lesch works with community

law enforcement programs – the kind that work to enhance the livability of neighborhoods by reducing crimes such as prostitution and drug dealing.

He said he hopes to stay connected with his district by continuing to stay active in the community and listen to the needs of his constituents. He also said he will work to stay aware of their concerns, such as housing, jobs, economic development, and public safety.

Lesch said he's keenly aware that a number of people in his district live paycheck to paycheck. He said all they want is the opportunity to have a good paying job and a roof over their heads.

"When they need something like busing or when they need employment or when they need housing, it's critical," he said. "It's the difference between stability and poverty in a single paycheck."

In addition, Lesch said, he thinks that government has been standing in the way of developers who are willing to build quality

housing in the locations that need them most. He hopes to help ease regulations so builders can provide the housing that people need.

### DISTRICT 66A

**2002 population:** 36,523

**Largest city:** St. Paul

**County:** Ramsey

**Location:** north and east St. Paul

**Top concern:** "You hear employers, Republican business owners, complaining about housing, because they also know that part of the reason we don't have housing is because government has regulated it out. You can't even approach the job issue, until you have a housing arrangement at least. That's number one."

— Rep. John Lesch