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5★ THE HARTFORD COURANT SECTION B

ARTS MINISTER PRAISED FOR CREATIVITY, ENERGY

West Hartford
Resident Serves In
Asylum Hill ChurchBy JOHNNY MASON
COURANT STAFF WRITER

All Steve Mitchell had to do was replace a much-adored minister of 34 years who had created the most spectacular event ever held at Asylum Hill Con-

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gregational Church.

Mitchell, who took over for Richard Einsel, the church's former minister of music, said he had expected the comparisons to the popular pastor when he became the church's minister of arts in January 2000.

But according to several church leaders and members, Mitchell has already carved out his own legacy in the church's great music tradition.

They say they are moved by Mitchell's energy and ability to use drama, music, dance and visual arts at Sunday worship services to "open windows to the creator."

"He's the best I've ever worked with," said the Rev. Gary Miller, pastor of the Asylum Hill church, who for seven years had served with Mitchell in Coral



JOHN LONG / THE HARTFORD COURANT

STEVE MITCHELL, minister of arts at Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford, leads the choir in a recent rehearsal. The West Hartford resident says each artistic performance at the church is intended to "open windows to the power of God."

Gables, Fla. "He understands music as ministry and not performance."

As the director of the church's 40-member chorus, Mitchell takes a multicultural and multiethnic approach, presenting music that ranges from African spirituals to Hebrew melodies.

The church's concert series, which will begin Friday with an 8 p.m. performance by the Dallas Brass, also re-

flects musical diversity. The series will include a Nov. 16 classical recital by organist Charles Miller and a Feb. 15 performance by folk singer Livingston Taylor. Tickets are \$15.

"I want to present a variety of music and art," said Mitchell, who lives in West Hartford with his wife, Rhonda, and children, Katie, 13, and David, 10. "All expressions of the human spirit are

valid."

Mitchell said each performance is created to "open windows to the power of God," and he hopes audience members and participants gain a clearer understanding of music and the message of sharing the common human experience.

"I want people to come away with a feeling of honesty, integrity and joy,"

said Mitchell. "There's no better way to be close to the creator than through creativity."

Church members are in awe of Mitchell's energy and knowledge of music said Sally Tresselt, who is chairwoman of the worship and fine arts committee and a member of the choir.

Tuesday night rehearsals are stimulating and enhanced by Mitchell's ability to give a historical perspective on any musical piece, which has helped singers get a better feeling for the work, Tresselt said.

He has also created an art gallery at the church where parishioners and others can showcase their work, produced a play and offered yoga and swing dance lessons, she said.

"He is unbelievable," Tresselt said. "He has more energy in one little finger than most people have in their entire body."

Last year, Mitchell arranged to have youth members of Dance Connecticut perform for the first time at the church's annual Boar's Head Festival, an event created by Einsel 34 years ago.

"It was just sensational. The kids were unbelievably good," said John Wadhams, a member of the Boar's Head Festival committee. "It's just one example of the kind of perspective that Steve has on ways of worship and reaching out to God."

For information on programs and events at Asylum Hill Congregational Church, call 860-525-5696.