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Minister will run for Tories

March Byelection; Meredith acclaimed in downtown riding

Chris Wattie, National Post

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Peter Redman, National Post

The Conservatives have picked black leader Don Meredith as their candidate for the Toronto Centre byelection, replacing a candidate dumped by federal party officials in November.

Don Meredith, a prominent businessman and Baptist minister, was acclaimed as the Tory candidate in the downtown riding by the party's riding association.

A Tory spokesman said Mr. Meredith, a long-time party member who does not live in the riding, had been interested in running for election for some time and agreed to run in the byelection when approached by the Toronto Centre riding executive. "He's wanted to do this for a long time, for his own reasons."

He replaces Mark Warner, the former Conservative candidate, who was disqualified in November for what the Conservatives' national party leadership claimed were complaints from his riding association.

Mr. Warner, who is also black, said he believed his candidacy was rejected because he was speaking out without party authorization on such subjects as education, housing and HIV/AIDS.

Bob Rae, the former NDP premier, will be running for the Liberals in the Toronto Centre riding, which came open in June with the resignation of veteran Liberal MP Bill Graham, a former defence and foreign affairs minister, who filled in as Liberal leader when Paul Martin stepped down.

Mr. Rae said he found it "a very strange experience" to be put in the position of defending Mr. Warner, his political opponent. "I'm looking forward to a well-fought campaign with Mr. Meredith," he said yesterday.

"But I still find the way that Mr. Warner was treated incomprehensible. I still don't know why they rejected him as the candidate."

Rev. Meredith, the chairman of the GTA Faith Alliance, was not available for comment yesterday.

But in a news release, he said: "I look forward to continuing my advocacy of real community-based solutions as a candidate for election to Canada's Parliament, and as a member of the Conservative caucus in Ottawa. I am proud to serve as their candidate in this most diverse and dynamic of ridings."

Mr. Meredith, who has launched mentoring programs for "at-risk" youth in Toronto's poor neighbourhoods, last May joined with Jewish leaders to quell the controversy that followed a decision to block a controversial black American lawyer and activist's entry to Canada.

Malik Zulu Shabazz, leader of the New Black Panther Party, missed a speaking engagement because he was not allowed across the border. The New Black Youth Taking Action network angrily blamed the "Jewish lobby," but Mr. Meredith told a joint news conference with Jewish groups that he opposed the entry of Mr. Shabazz, just as he would oppose the entry of anyone who had spread hateful messages.

Toronto Centre was one of four byelections the government called last month, announcing voting dates for the vacant ridings just four days before Christmas. Voters in three provinces will go to the polls on March 17, in Toronto Centre and Willowdale, as well as in Vancouver Quadra in British Columbia and Desnethe-Missinippi-Churchill River in Saskatchewan.

The Conservatives are facing a tough fight in Toronto Centre, a long-standing Liberal seat, and have finished a distant third in the polls for the last several elections.

But Mr. Rae said he was not taking anything for granted, even with all the turmoil in his opponent's camp. "I take all my opponents very seriously," he said. "I think this is going to be a wide-open race."

The Tory party spokesman said Mr. Warner's ouster was not a factor in Mr. Meredith's decision to run in Toronto Centre. "It's really not his concern-- it was before his time."

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