

Beleaguered voice of evangelicals resigns: Richard Cizik steps down

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The top Washington lobbyist for the National Association of Evangelicals, who had already faced criticism for his embrace of environmental activism, has resigned after signaling support for same-sex civil unions.

Richard Cizik, who had worked in NAE's Washington office for 28 years, resigned after being harshly criticized for the civil union comments and saying he voted for President-elect Barack Obama in the Virginia primary despite Obama's support of abortion rights.

NAE president Leith Anderson said Cizik's comments in a December 2 interview with National Public Radio's *Fresh Air* program were problematic because they did not reflect the views of many NAE member denominations and organizations.

"I think that what people did communicate . . . is that he cannot continue as a spokesperson for NAE, and the implication of that is that he resign," Anderson said in an interview with Religion News Service.

Anderson, a Minnesota megachurch pastor, said he and Cizik talked for "hours" December 10 after Cizik returned from an overseas trip and flew to Minneapolis. They came to a joint decision that Cizik needed to resign.

Cizik, 58, NAE's vice president for governmental affairs and its public face in the media and on Capitol Hill, declined to make immediate comment.

Among those disturbed by the decision was *Sojourners* president Jim Wallis, who said that for Cizik's "creative and courageous" service to NAE and a new generation of evangelicals "to end over the words of an interview is sad."

In the NPR interview, Cizik spoke on many topics, from gay marriage to abortion to the 2008 elections. "It's possible for me to disagree with a candidate on high-profile issues and still believe that, on the basis of character or philosophy, he's the better

of the two candidates,” Cizik said.

“So, in this case, it would be possible, as evangelicals did, to disagree with Barack Obama on same-sex marriage and abortion and yet vote for him. We know they did, not because of those positions . . . but in spite of those positions.” Cizik said he voted for Obama in the Virginia primary but did not disclose how he voted in the general election.

He also said his views about gays and marriage were evolving.

“I’m shifting, I have to admit,” he said. “In other words, I would be willing to say I believe in civil unions. I don’t officially support redefining marriage from its traditional definition, I don’t think.”

Critics from conservative groups, including Concerned Women for America and the Institute on Religion and Democracy, blasted Cizik, saying he didn’t represent “biblical orthodoxy” or “millions of other evangelicals.”

“He would say one thing to liberal audiences and say something different to NAE-type audiences,” said Wendy Wright, president of Concerned Women for America, whose organization is not a member of NAE. “So the NPR interview took the cloak off and revealed Rich Cizik’s true positions that . . . he has apparently held for quite a while. This is a good move forward for NAE.”

Focus on the Family founder James Dobson had called for Cizik to be fired in 2007 because of his “relentless campaign” against global warming. At that time the NAE board stood by Cizik and reaffirmed the commitment to care for the environment that was included in a 2003 NAE statement on “public engagement.”

Anderson pointed out that despite the need to step down, Cizik “has done a great deal of good” for the evangelical umbrella organization. Cizik was outspoken on issues ranging from sexual trafficking to religious persecution and was instrumental in writing NAE’s position statement on civic responsibility.

Ironically, the resignation came just days after Cizik was criticized by many gay-rights activists for signing an open letter published in the December 5 *New York Times*. The ad, titled “No Mob Rule,” decried the protests held nationwide after California’s Proposition 8 was approved by voters, revoking marriage rights for same-sex couples.

Gay-rights activists said the ad unfairly implied that vandalism, violence and intimidation were widespread in protests against Mormons and conservative Christian churches, and that criticism of religious groups that supported Proposition 8 amounted to “religious bigotry.”

After Cizik was pressured to resign, however, a leader in the gay-rights advocacy group Human Rights Campaign lamented that the action was taken against “a good man.” Harry Knox, director of HRC’s faith program, said, “Perhaps most disturbing about the NAE’s decision is that it makes no room for its leaders to grow in their belief.” *-Religion News Service, American Baptist Press*