

Forbes leaves famed pulpit, not prophetic role: Ready for the next great chapter

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Make no mistake: Take James A. Forbes Jr. away from a pulpit and he is not himself. Forbes's old friend the late African-American church historian James Melvin Washington used to kid the senior minister of Manhattan's Riverside Church by saying Forbes "would preach to clear his sinuses."

"He was right: If I don't preach, I won't be well," Forbes mused one morning recently in an office overlooking the church where he has presided, implored and, yes, preached for the better part of two decades.

But as Forbes reflected on his 18 years in one of the country's most prestigious and visible pulpits, he hardly sounded wistful. In fact, Forbes, 71, who will officially retire in June, seems fully ready for what he calls the next great chapter—setting his sights on nothing less than the spiritual renewal of the nation.

"I'd like to contribute to another 'Great Awakening,'" Forbes said, recalling the cycles of religious and spiritual renewal in the United States. "I want to use my energy, my voice, for spiritual revitalization. Whatever I do next is designed to call the nation to moral sensitivity; to challenge the nation to address the gap between the haves and the have-nots."

Those ambitious goals won't surprise those who have observed Forbes at Riverside, a 2,500-member church with ties to the United Church of Christ and the American Baptist Churches USA.

Forbes has been viewed, by turns, as a trailblazer (he is Riverside's first black senior minister), a figure of controversy (he freely admits that his leadership has not always endeared him to some in the congregation) and an angry prophet (he says the United States is in danger of being in thrall to the market and to "arrogant

pride”).

Forbes describes himself as a theological radical and political progressive who, with his black Pentecostal roots, feels that he can challenge theological conservatives and liberals alike and find ways to bring them together. He hopes to do that through an organization he recently formed—the Healing of the Nations Foundation, dedicated to the spiritual revitalization he believes is essential to a nation experiencing a pronounced “God gap.”

Such a gap, he says, exists not so much between Democrats and Republicans as between the experiencing of God, or the sacred, and the living of everyday life. “All of us in this culture have trouble sensing that which is . . . fundamentally sacred,” Forbes said. “We invest in a lot of nationalism, so the nation becomes a surrogate God.”

On this, Forbes sounds like the political progressive he is—the man who has appeared regularly on liberal radio network Air America and supports gay marriage, a position that puts him at odds with many other black clergy.

Frequently he has said that “it’s altar-call time” for the United States and that the country faces a crossroads: it will venture further down a path laden with “greed, pride, imperialistic domination” or embrace “a sense of truth, of sacrifice, the ideas of justice, equality and environmental responsibility.”

While many at interracial and interdenominational Riverside have applauded Forbes for such views, others did not warm to his politics or his intense style of preaching, despite the church’s well-earned reputation for political liberalism and racial comity. (Forbes’s predecessor included such liberal stalwarts as Harry Emerson Fosdick and William Sloane Coffin.)

When Forbes announced his plans last September to leave Riverside, George Bynoe, a prominent Forbes critic within the congregation, said publicly that he wished Forbes well but felt that the pastor had little to show for his 18 years at Riverside. Bynoe also said that Forbes was too closely associated with members of the Democratic Party.

Bynoe was also part of a faction that criticized Forbes’s management and filed a lawsuit alleging improper handling of Riverside’s finances—a suit which a New York State Supreme Court judge later dismissed.

Forbes said he is proud of his time at Riverside, noting that membership increased and that the church became a more energized, "go-to venue." He is also philosophical about fractures and divisions within the congregation.

"There are mean people in all institutions," he said. The senior minister's position, he believes, "grants you a bully pulpit, but it doesn't protect you against dissent."

Forbes's advice for his successor? "Don't accept the job," he said, "unless you have a deep sense of divine appointment to it." -Chris Herlinger, *Religion News Service*