

New pastor quits Riverside Church amid conflict: An abrupt departure

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The senior minister of New York City's famed Riverside Church has resigned just two months following his installation, after a nasty fight with his new flock landed the church in court.

Brad Braxton's abrupt departure comes amid congregational discord over the church's mission and the pastor's compensation package, which critics estimated to be as high as \$600,000. Church officials said the package was consistent with those for similar high-profile pulpits.

Chosen last September out of 200 applicants to be Riverside's sixth senior minister, the former Rhodes scholar saw strife from day one. In April four church members unsuccessfully sued to block his installation, alleging violations of church bylaws relating to his compensation package.

The congregation, whose soaring church building was constructed by tycoon John D. Rockefeller Jr. on Manhattan's Upper West Side in 1927, has become renowned for its interracial and interdenominational brand of preaching and social action.

Braxton was the second African American chosen to lead the 2,400-member congregation, following James Forbes, who retired June 1, 2007. The church's changing demographics, from majority white to majority black, have been a source of tension.

Betty Davis, a Riverside member who was on the committee that selected Braxton, told *Religion & Ethics News Weekly* that "as soon as his name was announced, the attacks started. One of the things that some people are afraid of is that the church will turn black. . . . I really resent that."

Braxton's evangelical and scripturally focused preaching was also an issue; some saw it as a threat to Riverside's reputation for being open and inclusive.

In his letter of resignation to the congregation, Braxton said he came to Riverside “to serve as pastor and to promote serious engagement with scripture that would reignite the spiritual inspiration underlying the church’s social activism.”

He continued: “The consistent discord has made it virtually impossible to establish a fruitful covenant between the congregation and me that facilitates the flourishing of the congregation, the broader community, and my family.” -*Religion News Service*