

Riverside tensions akin to progressive angst? Changing of the liberal guard: Changing of the liberal guard

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When Brad Braxton was tapped last year as the next senior pastor of Riverside Church, he was billed as an energetic and dynamic preacher with the power to reinvigorate the flagship pulpit of progressive Protestantism.

Soon, however, those very qualities got in the way. Some parishioners found him a little too energetic. He talked a lot about Jesus and perhaps a little too much about scripture. Some critics even used the dreaded *f* word—*fundamentalist*—to describe him.

Two months after his installation, Braxton, 40, abruptly resigned on June 29 after a bitter dispute over his leadership style and compensation package made his job impossible and untenable. While Braxton's departure was shaped by Riverside's unique culture, some see a generational conflict over what constitutes progressive Christianity.

"It was persistent rancor that went on for weeks and weeks," Braxton said, asserting that he is baffled that a minister who has publicly championed gay marriage could be labeled a biblical fundamentalist.

"I take scripture seriously, but I've tried to articulate what a progressive reading looks like."

As the old guard of the progressive movement of the 1960s starts to fade from view, a younger generation, represented by Braxton and others, has taken hold of a reinvigorated religious left. Unwilling to cede their renewed prominence to conservatives and evangelicals, they understand that if they want to be taken

seriously, their alternative voice needs to be rooted in scripture. As Braxton puts it, they must answer “the why” with as much fervor as their forebears preached “the what.”

The intersection of West 120th Street and Claremont Avenue on Manhattan’s Upper West Side, sandwiched between Harlem and Columbia University, for years was the hub of progressive theology. Riverside sits on one corner, Union Theological Seminary is on another, and the National Council of Churches is on a third.

These were the stomping grounds of the old guard—with Harry Emerson Fosdick and William Sloane Coffin at Riverside, Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr at Union, and a host of left-leaning faith groups at NCC’s so-called God Box.

The transfer of power hasn’t been without its challenges.

Over at Union, Serene Jones, 49, recently completed her first year as the first female president of the nation’s best-known training ground for liberal-minded clergy. Most recently, it has been a center for black and feminist theologies.

From her side of the street, Jones said “there’s no grand story to be told” about Braxton’s brief tenure, although, she said, “the tensions of Riverside are a microcosm of some of the tensions that run through liberal Protestantism in general.

“There’s no single diagnosis of a problem that can be solved, as if the mainline church is a sick patient that needs a cure,” Jones said. “I see it going through a process of cultural and religious change of such tremendous significance that no one knows how to manage the change.”

These are, she says, “the waters we all swim in.”

By most accounts, Jones’s first year went smoothly, even as she wrestled with the severe economic downturn. That resulted in shrinkage in the endowment that had been painstakingly rebuilt in recent years following an era of potentially fatal financial distress.

“I’m amazed how well it went,” Jones said of her first year, “except for the money question.”

Katharine Rhodes Henderson, 53, the new president of Presbyterian-affiliated Auburn Theological Seminary, which shares a campus with Union, said the financial

downturn has enabled the younger generation to demonstrate their “keen sense about the need for partnership and collaboration, both as a way to address the current financial challenges but also because we can increase our impact by working together.”

The expectation of working together is partly what hobbled Braxton. Congregants complained, loudly and publicly, about what they said was insufficient collaboration. For his part, Braxton said that longstanding—and unresolved—power dynamics that stretch back to Riverside’s earliest history contributed to his decision to leave.

“It’s in the DNA of the place,” Braxton said, noting that tensions existed even between Fosdick, Riverside’s acclaimed first minister, and John D. Rockefeller Jr., who built the soaring Gothic-style church.

Just how much racial dynamics were a factor is difficult to gauge. Riverside has become an increasingly African-American congregation, and Braxton was the second African American to lead the church. Some at Riverside were reportedly unhappy with Braxton’s preaching style, rooted in the black Baptist tradition.

Anonymous e-mails made the rounds among some of the 2,400-member congregation, implying that Braxton was a theological conservative, even a fundamentalist.

“If you’re impassioned and use the name *Jesus*, you’re [seen as] a right-wing Christian,” said one Riverside parishioner, a Braxton supporter who asked not to be quoted by name because tensions are still high. Most “old-style” liberal Protestants, she said, are simply “not comfortable with zeal.”

That doesn’t surprise Bob Edgar, who spend eight years as Riverside’s neighbor when he was general secretary of the National Council of Churches.

Recalling his own time at the council, Edgar said, “I found it a challenge to balance those who cared about faith and works (social action) with those who cared about faith and order (ties to tradition), and sprinkled with folks who added New Wave spirituality to either or both of the two major theologies.

The challenge for Riverside and other pulpits, Braxton said, is to match a proud legacy of social activism with an authentic religious voice, one that’s rooted in scripture and unafraid to speak in religious terms. “Deeds and creeds must support each other,” he said. -Chris Herlinger, *Religion News Service*