

Senate race thrusts ‘Black America’s church’ into spotlight

by [Aaron L. Morrison](#) in the [February 10, 2021](#) issue



Mourners gather around the casket of Martin Luther King Jr. as it arrives at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta on April 8, 1968. (AP Photo / TM)

For decades, the redbrick Gothic Revival church where Martin Luther King Jr. once preached has been a monument to the history of Black Americans’ fight for civil rights and the legacy of an activist icon.

But it was a high-stakes Senate race and a Trump-era cultural debate that thrust Ebenezer Baptist Church into the center of the current political debate.

Its senior pastor, Raphael Warnock, was elected to the Senate after a runoff election that gave Democrats control of Congress in the first years of the administration of

President Joe Biden. Warnock's preaching became a focal point in the debate about race and justice during the election.

His opponent, Republican incumbent Kelly Loeffler, ran attack ads using snippets of sermons Warnock preached from Ebenezer's pulpit to accuse him of being a far-left, radical socialist who doesn't support police officers or military service members.

For King's former church, the intense spotlight isn't new. Its 6,000 members are accustomed to standing-room-only Sunday services, due in large part to the out-of-town visitors who flock to the church. Still, Loeffler's criticisms renewed attention on a pillar of Black life in Atlanta and the tradition of political activism it represents.

Ebenezer is "Black America's church," said Timothy McDonald III, pastor of First Iconium Baptist Church in Atlanta and former assistant pastor of Ebenezer. "It's bigger than any individual."

Commonly referred to as "Martin Luther King's church," Ebenezer sits in the middle of a national park dedicated to the civil rights icon's life and legacy, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors and tourists annually. Warnock's leadership at the church is his chief credential, a position so prestigious some note the US Senate is a step down.

Warnock continued to preach as he campaigned for office—albeit pre-recorded in an empty sanctuary, due to the pandemic. And he will continue to preach even while he serves as a Georgia's first Black US senator.

Since before the abolition of slavery, the Black church has played a role in brokering congregants' relationship to political power. It's not uncommon for politicians, most often Democrats, to campaign from Black church pulpits. But it's still relatively rare for church leaders to cross over into public office.

Within the last year, Ebenezer has been part of a few major national news events.

It hosted the funeral of Rayshard Brooks, a Black man fatally shot in the back by Atlanta police in June, amid nationwide protests over George Floyd's death at the hands of Minneapolis police in late May.

Warnock was an officiant at that service, as well as at the late July funeral of civil rights icon and Atlanta congressman John Lewis, who was an Ebenezer member.

“This church is situated at the heart of Atlanta, and its leadership has always opened its doors to the community,” said Daunta Long, pastor of Seed Planters Church of God in Christ in McDonough, about 40 miles southeast of the city.

Balancing pastoral duties and a national public profile is a common source of tension, noted McDonald, the former assistant pastor. Martin Luther King Jr. was not present for the voting rights march now known as Bloody Sunday because he was expected to preach at Ebenezer for Communion Sunday, the first Sunday of the month, according to Clayborne Carson, the historian who maintains King’s papers at Stanford University.

Ebenezer’s members, many of whom supported Warnock’s candidacy, say they worry about losing his leadership.

“People love him as their pastor,” said Xernona Clayton, 90, a King family confidante and member of the church since 1963. “I think, selfishly, they don’t want to lose him. They want the best of two areas: good representation in the political arena and a pastor in the pulpit.”

“I’d imagine both of those jobs would be full-time,” she added. —Associated Press