

Black clergy plan to forge own path in divided nation

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Representatives of two black Baptist denominations—the Progressive National Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention USA—declared Oct. 9 they would stand apart from white liberals and conservatives alike while seeking to address a politically divided nation.

Rejecting the “politics of fear” they say has taken hold in this election season, the pastors assembled at the National Press Club said that race and spirituality should not be ignored as the two sides work to get out the vote.

“As the body of Christ, we do not serve as mere mascots of the liberal left, sent by patronizing paternalists to serve as the point on the head of their ideological spear,” reads a declaration released by Progressive National Baptist Convention President Timothy Stewart and Calvin Butts, the denomination’s social justice chair.

“Nor do we set horses with those of the religious right who hide their rampant racism and hysterical hypocrisy amidst the existential ruins of a morally and theologically bankrupt spirituality.”

‘An issue of justice’

Matthew V. Johnson Sr., the Birmingham, Ala., pastor who wrote the declaration, said in an interview white religious conservatives and liberals have focused on opposite sides of hot-button issues such as abortion and LGBTQ rights while not giving race and racism enough attention.

"It's not just about black special interests," said Johnson, vice chair of the Progressive National Baptists' Social Justice Commission. "This is an issue of justice."

At the news conference, Johnson noted Democrats and others protesting the nomination of now-Justice Brett Kavanaugh showed a lack of concern about the nominee's record on race issues. Their indifference, Johnson said, is an example of "the problem that we have with the liberal left."

The Progressive National Baptists, the denomination of Martin Luther King Jr., formed as a breakaway group from the National Baptist Convention in the 1960s after the National Baptist Convention opposed sit-ins and other civil rights protests. The presence of Amos Brown, social justice chair of the National Baptist Convention, demonstrated his group's support for the younger denomination's declaration.

Butts, senior pastor of New York's Abyssinian Baptist Church, said that as black preachers, "We have our own view of the gospel message which is the only authentic view."

Naming Franklin Graham, Jerry Falwell Jr. and Paula White—all members of the Religious Right—Butt said: "They're heretics as far as we're concerned—hypocrites. And we need to be unafraid to say this and stand firmly on who we are."

Not just about President Trump

At its annual meeting in August, the Progressive National Baptist Convention protested Trump administration policies it believes are harmful to the poor, people of color and working-class families.

But the October declaration states that the nation's current cultural crisis is not the sole fault of its president.

"The presidency of Donald Trump is not the cause of the American malady but a symptom, a consequence, an effect; although by the aid and abetting of the present administration the sickness has received license and worsened," the declaration reads.

Speakers at the news conference said getting out the vote could be just one effect of their declaration.

Brown emphasized the need to "get rid of this excuse: 'My vote won't count.'"

"Every vote counts. We've got to get that over to our congregations," he said.

Butts anticipated the declaration also would lead to other steps, including black church support of personal withdrawing of money from banks, such as Wells Fargo, for their role in the subprime mortgage crisis that has disproportionately affected minority homeowners.

"We will be asking our churches to focus on action against these banks," Butts said. "And always remember that when this economy booms, it is usually at the exploitation of black and brown people."

Others attending the declaration announcement included representatives of the Church of God in Christ, the Interfaith Alliance, the National African American Clergy Network and the Ecumenical Poverty Initiative.