

Pastor resigns from Trump's evangelical advisory board

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Pastor A.R. Bernard resigned from the White House's evangelical advisory board in the wake of President Trump's widely condemned comments on a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Va.

Bernard attributed his departure to a "deepening conflict in values" with the administration.

Bernard, 64, was a civil rights activist as a teenager and is lead pastor at the Christian Cultural Center, a predominantly African-American congregation in Brooklyn. He tweeted out his letter of resignation from the high-profile board Aug. 18.

Its members endured criticism in recent days for standing by Trump after critics said the president appeared to draw a moral equivalence between protesters and counter-protesters in Charlottesville, and as executives, in response to the president's comments, began to resign from White House business boards.

In Charlottesville, white nationalists shouted anti-Semitic and racist slogans, and a woman died after a car driven by a Nazi sympathizer plowed into a crowd of anti-racism activists.

Urging others to speak out

On Don Lemon's show on CNN, Bernard said other members of the advisory council should be more willing to publicly criticize the president.

"I would love to see more of the evangelical leaders who are on the board

make strong statements in reaction to it, and that doesn't mean they have to abandon him," he said. "But they should come out and say something of substance."

The Trump campaign announced its Evangelical Executive Advisory Board in June 2016 as the then-candidate became the presumptive Republican presidential nominee. It was tasked with convening regularly to "provide advisory support to Mr. Trump on those issues important to Evangelicals and other people of the faith in America," according to a statement at the time.

The board was not convened officially by the administration after the election. But it did not disband either, and, since then, "its relationship with the White House has been informal but certainly active," said Johnnie Moore, an evangelical author and advocate who has served as unofficial spokesperson for the group.

"The members of the board have been the anchor attendees/invitees of all the evangelical meetings and a number of us have acted as unofficial advisors in various ways across the government, all in our capacity as private citizens," Moore continued.

The White House has hosted several meetings of prominent evangelical Christians since Trump took office, including a May dinner the night before the National Day of Prayer in the Blue Room of the White House and two gatherings in July. One has been described as a day of meetings with White House staff at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in July that ended with a prayer for the president in the Oval Office.

James MacDonald, pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel in suburban Chicago, was the first to resign from the evangelical advisory board last fall after the release of a 2005 recording of Trump making lewd remarks about women.

Bernard said in a tweeted statement about his resignation that he had

distanced himself from the evangelical advisory board months ago.

Business leaders distance themselves from Trump

After Trump's comments Tuesday, in which the president referred to the "fine people" among both protesters and counter-protesters, CEOs began to resign from two White House business advisory councils, citing their own commitments to tolerance and racial equality and how, as the councils pursued a stronger economy, politics had become a distraction. The president later announced he was disbanding both his Strategy and Policy Forum and his Manufacturing Council.

The remaining members of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities all also resigned Aug. 18 in a letter sent to the White House.

Attention then turned to the president's religious counselors, with critics asking why evangelical advisory board members wouldn't break with Trump.

"While America's manufacturing giants take principled moral stands against white supremacy and Donald Trump's failure on Saturday to renounce racists by name, none of the members of his 'Evangelical Advisory Council'—the so-called court evangelicals—have resigned their posts," John Fea, a professor at Messiah College in Pennsylvania who studies Christianity and American history, wrote.

"Apparently in the United States it is the manufacturers, not the evangelical clergy who advise the POTUS, who now deliver moral messages to the White House."

Not abandon president or Bernard

While multiple members of the evangelical advisory group spoke out against bigotry on social media and from their pulpits, they also declared it

would be wrong to abandon a president more in need of faithful advisers than ever.

Neither did they abandon Bernard, with several tweeting statements or making remarks on weekend news shows complimenting the pastor.

Moore issued a statement noting his longstanding respect for Bernard, noting “sometimes friends disagree,” but disagreement “doesn’t change our commitment to our shared faith and friendship.”

“We have every intention to continue to extend invitations to him to contribute his perspective on issues important to all of us,” Moore said.

More than 80 percent of white evangelicals voted for Trump, the largest proportion of all religious groups polled. These voters often say they do not always approve of Trump’s personal behavior, but they admire his leadership skills and business acumen and appreciate that he kept his promise to nominate a conservative to the Supreme Court.