RELIGION

Pastor pushed out after parishioners complain about focus on racial justice

FEBRUARY 4, 2025 · 5:00 AM ET

HEARD ON ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

Frank Langfitt

Pastor Benjamin Boswell, who was pushed out as the senior minister at Myers Park Baptist Church, is seen Sunday, Jan. 26, in Charlotte, N.C.
Sam Wolfe for NPR

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The Sunday after Donald Trump won a second term, Pastor Ben Boswell took to the pulpit at Myers Park Baptist, a liberal church in Charlotte, and delivered the sort of blunt, provocative sermon for which he is well known.

Boswell likened the moment to what he called the "gathering dark of Hitler's rule." He added that Trump's election would lead to the "crucifixion" of immigrant families as well as transgender and nonbinary people.

"But our faith also teaches us ... that every crucifixion needs a witness," Boswell said. "The fight is not over, it's just beginning."

The congregation, including the board of deacons, the church's governing body, gave Boswell a standing ovation.

NATIONAL

Churches have a long history of being safe havens — for immigrants and others

Several weeks later, the board met on Zoom. They voted 17-3 to ask Boswell to step down. NPR obtained the audio.

It provides a rare window into the debate within an organization when the tone of its social or political messaging clashes with its business model.

Conversations we rarely hear

Marcy McClanahan, then head of the board, said the first reason Boswell needed to go was plunging attendance. Myers Park had gone from average weekly attendance of about 350 when Boswell arrived in 2016 to about 150 last year.

"Ben has been given every chance to change his words and actions to appeal to a broader audience," McClanahan said, "but has not been successful in doing so."

Myers Park Baptist Church has a rich civil rights history and sits in one of Charlotte's wealthiest neighborhoods.
Sam Wolfe for NPR

Fellow Deacon Robert Dulin was more direct.

"We have got to put more butts in the seats, butts in the seats," he said.

In a statement later, Dulin said he personally loved what he called Boswell's "powerful prophetic preaching."

The problem, he said at the meeting, is that too many other parishioners didn't. Dulin said many people who had left the church in recent years had complained about the 44-year-old pastor's heavy focus on social and racial justice.

"Indicted because I'm white"

Dulin paraphrased what he said he had heard over and over from those who had quit the parish: "I am tired of being indicted because I am white. I am tired of being banged over the head every week about immigrants and LGBTQ, and I just want to come to church and be encouraged."

Carol Pearsall, who is 73 and a longtime church member, said she heard the same thing from outgoing parishioners and knew what they meant. "I was ready for less guilt-trip and more love," said Pearsall, who added that she remains a fan of Boswell's and never considered leaving.

Asked if the pastor's removal was an attempt to save Myers Park, she responded: "Absolutely."

RELIGION

Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde confronts Trump in sermon

Boswell says the conflict at Myers Park is part of a much bigger national trend to roll back diversity, equity and inclusion programs. He thinks the country is in a pivotal moment, when "that work is coming with a cost, and people are getting tired and backing off."

Nicholas Rhyne, who grew up in the church and is a Boswell supporter, says the divisions in Myers Park reflect those in the Democratic Party writ large. He's 30 and says people in his generation came of age during the global financial crisis, climate anxiety and the polarized politics of the past decade, and were excited and inspired by Boswell to make change. Meanwhile, he says, some older members of the congregation prefer to take a slower, more measured approach.

"There's a group of us who are younger and more passionate and maybe a tad more progressive who are fed up with just being told to wait, don't worry," said Rhyne. "There's definitely a generational divide."

Nicholas Rhyne, 30, grew up in the church and says he supports former Pastor Ben Boswell. He says the divisions in Myers Park reflect those in the Democratic Party writ large.
Sam Wolfe for NPR

"Sacred cows make the best hamburgers"

McClanahan, the former head of the board of deacons, told NPR that Boswell was not pushed out over politics or his preaching. Instead, she said, the church needed to focus more on other areas of its strategic plan, including faith development, the church community and sustainability.

"Ben's an excellent preacher," she told NPR, "but there's more to leading a church than preaching."

For instance, some say Boswell focused too much on social justice and not enough on

tending the flock.

Bob Thomason, a former chairman of the board of deacons, said most or all of the congregation supports social justice. "But for some people, being able to focus on social justice ... would be a welcome luxury because they have alcoholic spouses," he said. "They have children that are addicted. They have cancer. They have these personal needs."

Thomason, who said he was speaking as a longtime church member, said Boswell wasn't great at the pastoral part of the job.

"We were basically taking care of ourselves as best we could," he said.

Boswell disagrees and says he supervised a staffer who was devoted to pastoral care full time.

During his nine years at Myers Park, Boswell says he pushed the church to confront what he called its whiteness. Several years ago at an anti-racism seminar, he said Myers Park needed to change its wedding policy, which had been described as "WASPy," and decolonize its interior space as part of what he called a "whiteness audit."

Boswell says he ran into resistance from congregants who, for instance, told him to take down Black Lives Matter signs at the church. Boswell persisted.

"I like to joke [that] churches have sacred cows," Boswell said during the anti-racism seminar. "Sacred cows make the best hamburgers."

Myers Park Baptist Church is a mostly white congregation known for its focus on racial and social justice.
Sam Wolfe for NPR

Declining attendance and giving

But as people left Myers Park, their contributions left with them. Since 2020, the church budget has shrunk by nearly a quarter, according to McClanahan.

Declining giving and church attendance are a national phenomenon, but some on the board of deacons saw it as an existential threat.

"Ben needs to leave in order for our church to take a different direction and grow because we are dying on the vine," Dulin told his fellow deacons during the board meeting.

Myers Park is an overwhelmingly white church in a neighborhood where mansions can sell for up to $4 million. It has a proud civil rights history and wears its inclusivity on its red brick walls. One giant sign on the front of the church reads: "80 years of inclusivity, community, spirituality and justice." Another reads: "Open to all, now and forevermore."

In the board meeting, then-Deacon Allen Davis warned that getting rid of Boswell would make it difficult to sell that message.

"What will come out is that we've snatched the keys from the ... minister who had been pushing us to confront whiteness to challenge racial justice in our community," said Davis, one of three deacons who resigned in protest after the vote.

Allen Davis, who quit as a deacon at Myers Park, says the removal of Pastor Ben Boswell makes it much harder for the church to sell its message of inclusivity.
Sam Wolfe for NPR

McClanahan insisted to NPR that the church will continue to advance racial and social justice. "One person's leaving does not change that path at all," she said.

"The church betrayed me"

Some congregants are skeptical. Bruce Griffin is a warehouse worker in Charlotte who joined the church more than five years ago. He says Boswell created a wonderful, welcoming community. Now, he's bitter.

RELIGION

How culture wars divided one small progressive church in Philadelphia

"I feel the church betrayed me," said Griffin, standing outside the church during a meeting called to address the turmoil over Boswell's departure. He said the meeting was all business.

"There was no hugging," he said. "There was no fellowship."

When asked about the fact that some white congregants said they felt beaten down by Boswell's continued emphasis on social and racial justice, Griffin responded that as a Black man he felt beaten down every day.

Griffin said he planned to leave Myers Park.

Elizabeth Peterson, on the other hand, said she was attending for the first time in years. She said Boswell divided the church, which she said seemed more focused on people of color and LGBTQ+ folks than on white women in their 60s like her.

"I wished that he could have brought his energy for diversity and for change of the culture of the church and included us to come with him," said Peterson, who said she might return to Myers Park.

Elizabeth Peterson, a parishioner at Myers Park who drifted away in recent years, says the church seemed more interested in people of color and LGBTQ+ folks than older, white women like her.
Sam Wolfe for NPR

Boswell has heard this criticism before. He says when someone has been part of the dominant culture for so long, the focus and attention on anyone who's been

marginalized feels like a slight.

He knows some people think he made a mistake by focusing so much on racial and social justice, but he said he'd do it again.

"My feeling is that as a progressive congregation, as a progressive pastor, our job right now is not to back away," Boswell said, "but to double down."