

Progressive National Baptist Convention Elects New Leader, Walter Parrish III

August 26, 2009 8:45 AM |



A New Jersey pastor who formerly worked for American Baptist Churches USA has been chosen to lead one of America's largest black Baptist denominations. Walter Parrish III, senior pastor of Union Baptist Church in Montclair, N.J., was elected general secretary of the Progressive National Baptist Convention at the group's recent annual meeting in Louisville, Ky.

Parrish, 50, will succeed Tyrone Pitts, general secretary of the PNBC since 1989, who is retiring. Parrish is scheduled to take over the job Jan. 1 and will continue as senior pastor of the Montclair church in addition to his role with the PNBC, according to an announcement on the church website.

Before moving to the historic African-American congregation, which is affiliated with both the PNBC and ABC, Parrish worked 12 years for American Baptists' Ministers and Missionaries Benefits Board. He went to Montclair in March 2002, first as interim pastor, and then was called as the church's eighth permanent pastor that May.

Claiming 2.5 million members around the world and 1.5 million in the United States, the PNBC is the third-largest African-American Baptist convention. It formed in 1961 out of a power struggle between younger ministers in the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., Inc., who wanted to move the denomination to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement and the established leadership that desired to keep politics out of the convention and focus on worship and ecclesiastical concerns.

The PNBC was spiritual home for many of the period's most celebrated civil-rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr. Over the decades since, the denomination has continued to emphasize social justice.

In a hallway interview at the August annual meeting posted on YouTube, Parrish urged younger pastors to involve themselves in the PNBC as a way to "speak truth to power, to talk about prophetic preaching and to talk about social-justice issues that even with a black president we still need to wrestle with and grapple with."

"We want this convention to be one that resources pastors and one where pastors can resource each other," Parrish said.

The son of a Baptist preacher -- his father, Walter Parrish II, has been executive minister of American Baptist Churches of the South since 1979 -- Parrish is a native of Lynchburg, Va. He grew up there and in Baltimore and Columbia, Md., before heading off to Morehouse College in Atlanta, where he earned an accounting degree in 1981.

While working as a computer analyst, he worshiped at Atlanta's historic Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he was licensed to preach.

From there Parrish left Atlanta to further his ministerial training at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he earned the master of divinity degree in 1987. While in New York he was pastor of Devoe Street (formerly the First Italian) Baptist Church in Brooklyn and was ordained to the ministry by the American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York.

Parrish went to the MMBB in 1990 and served there in a number of capacities. His last position was associate executive director with responsibility for directing the agency's initiative to provide benefits and services to denominations and denominational groups outside the ABC, including the National Baptist Convention of America, Inc.; the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc., and the PNBC.

Parrish's wife, Felicia, is also an ordained minister. They have two sons.

ABC General Secretary Roy Medley offered congratulations to both Parrish and the PNBC. "Walter is well-respected within ABC life where he has served for years, and we know he will bring excellent leadership to PNBC," Medley said.

Medley also praised Parrish's predecessor, Tyrone Pitts. "Dr. Pitts has been known internationally for his prophetic ministry, and we wish him God's blessings in his upcoming retirement," Medley said.

Before coming to the PNBC in 1989, Pitts worked nine years as director for racial justice with the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. He is an ordained minister in the PNBC.

Source: Bob Allen, Senior Writer, Associated Baptist Press.