Pawlenty’s pastor avoids politics in the pulpit

by G. Jeffrey MacDonald
June 30, 2011

When GOP presidential hopeful Tim Pawlenty goes to church, he knows he'll hear a 27-minute sermon—never longer, never shorter. But whether he'll hear a biblical endorsement of the Republican platform is far less certain.

Pawlenty gets his spiritual guidance from Leith Anderson, senior pastor at Wooddale Church in Eden Prairie, Minnesota, and president of the National Association of Evangelicals. Anderson says he toes no partisan line, though some hardline Republicans might question some past NAE positions if Pawlenty were to emerge as a GOP contender.

Anderson said before the July 4 weekend that he will retire as senior pastor of the megachurch by December, staying on as minister-at-large. Anderson said his decision was unrelated to the Pawlenty campaign and that he did not foresee any role with the Republican primary candidate.

"I've never preached a political sermon that says you ought to vote for this party or that candidate, or that we should be taking specific stands on certain legislation," said Anderson, who's been at Wooddale since 1977.

Anderson, 66, had already served twice as interim NAE president but became president in 2007, a year after his predecessor, Ted Haggard, resigned in the wake of a gay sex and drug scandal. Around the same time, evangelicals were openly asking whether they'd become too closely aligned with Republican politics and lost their moral authority.

"When a church embraces a political party and becomes politicized, they lose their prophetic voice," said Jo Anne Lyon, general superintendent of the Wesleyan Church, which belongs to the NAE. "There's an enormous trust that people have with [Anderson], and that allows him to lead."

President Obama appointed Anderson to his faith-based advisory council, and on any given Sunday, Anderson's 5,000-member flock includes Fortune 500 CEOs, major league coaches and other Twin Cities leaders.

"I'm not the only one Leith Anderson has inspired; great leaders have many followers," Pawlenty wrote in his 2010 autobiography, *Courage to Stand.* "But he'd be the first to underscore that his mission is not about him; it's about drawing others to Jesus."

Anderson isn't shy about discerning a political agenda in scripture. When he reads in Psalms, "I knit you together in your mother's womb," he sees a strong antiabortion message. He also opposes same-sex marriage on biblical grounds.

Yet on other issues—particularly immigration and the environment—Anderson parts with many social conservatives. And that has some conservatives wondering if Anderson's moderate streak could be a political liability for Pawlenty.

When former NAE lobbyist Richard Cizik angered social conservatives by calling for action on climate change, Anderson stood by him and signed a 2006 statement, "Climate Change: An Evangelical Call to Action."

Anderson continues to press the issue as a matter of justice for the poor in the developing world, working behind the scenes to craft an official NAE statement on climate change. "He was very accepting of what people had to say" when a creation care working group met in March, Lyon said. "But he was immediately coming back with: 'How does scripture speak to this?

What are we called to say?'"

But Erick Erickson, editor of the influential conservative blog Redstate, said "there is a real concern" among conservative evangelicals about Anderson's 25-year influence on Pawlenty. "Some of Pawlenty's critics will attempt to capitalize on some of Leith Anderson's statements and stands, including his position on global warming," Erickson said in an e-mail.

Earlier this year, when Erickson tweeted that "Pawlenty's preacher is going to cause him some problems" on the environment, *Salon* likened Anderson to Jeremiah Wright, the outspoken Chicago pastor who nearly derailed President Obama's 2008 campaign.

The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* leaped to Anderson's defense. "Pawlenty's presidential ambitions may or may not have a prayer," the paper said, "but that should not be because of his pastor."

Whatever the implications for presidential politics, observers say, Anderson's moderate approach can help evangelicals rally bipartisan support on a number of issues, from human trafficking to religious freedom.

"No one knows what the evangelical position is on AIDS or global warming," said David Woodard, a Clemson University political scientist and a Republican consultant. "Christianity speaks to the whole of life . . . and this broad approach gives [the NAE] a chance to talk to groups that they wouldn't normally be talking to."

After running a large megachurch and planting nine churches around the Twin Cities—including one at the Mall of America—Anderson does not tolerate sloppiness. Soon after taking the helm at NAE, Anderson found the quality of reports from several NAE committees and commissions to be an "embarrassment," according to George Brushaber, retired president of Bethel University and a 30-year member of the NAE board.

Those deemed to be doing subpar work were swiftly terminated. As Anderson leads, the NAE seems to follow. Five years ago, the association was notably mum on immigration reform. But Anderson, a trained sociologist, sees Hispanics playing a prominent role in the future of evangelicalism, and the NAE now supports comprehensive immigration reform.

"I was with him at a large gathering of 10,000 Hispanic evangelicals in Orlando," Brushaber said. "Leith was just forging relationships, friendships and partnerships. . . . That just didn't happen in the old days of NAE. All of a sudden, the membership of NAE understands how significant is the Hispanic evangelical population in the United States."
—RNS