

Protestant icons post job vacancy signs: Riverside Church, Union Seminary and the NCC

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When Bob Edgar announced that he was stepping down as head of the National Council of Churches, someone suggested that he might apply for the soon-to-be-vacant pulpit across the street at the historic Riverside Church. Or perhaps a better fit might be yet another nearby position on Manhattan's Upper West Side—the soon-to-be-vacant presidency at Union Theological Seminary, where Joseph C. Hough Jr. is retiring.

As it turned out, Edgar, a former Democratic member of Congress, returned to Washington to head the public advocacy group Common Cause.

The departures of Edgar from the NCC, Hough from Union Seminary and James Forbes from Riverside are leaving three venerable—some might say vulnerable—icons of liberal Protestantism with “Help Wanted” signs on their doors.

While coincidental, the three vacancies have made for a unique situation for the church organizations sharing the same neighborhood. It so happens that Forbes studied and taught at Union, Hough regularly worships at Riverside, and Edgar occasionally preached from Riverside's pulpit.

Union has produced generations of leaders for pulpits like Riverside, the soaring Gothic church built by John D. Rockefeller Jr. in the 1920s. The NCC, meanwhile, emerged in the 1950s to push publicly the progressive social justice message taught at places like Union and preached at churches like Riverside.

The three institutions once helped define the American Protestant establishment, just as resurgent conservatives have since redefined the U.S. religious landscape.

For his part, Hough, 74, says the change simply represents “a passing of the baton from one generation to another.” (Forbes is 71 and Edgar is 64.)

All three men say they're optimistic that liberal Protestantism—the interwoven mix of Christian gospel, political activism and the quest for social justice—may actually be reemerging as a serious force.

“There are puddles here and there,” Forbes said recently about the pockets of progressive Christianity he sees bubbling up in the United States, “and I’ve begun to see streams—though at what point do we see rivers that reach the sea?”

Edgar and Hough, both adept at fund-raising, found resources to pull the NCC and Union from the brink of financial collapse.

But even those who support the mission of the three New York institutions wonder if those bodies have fully grasped some fundamental changes.

“Could it be that the theme that runs through the three institutions is that what used to be the establishment is no longer?” said Leonid Kishkovsky of the Orthodox Church in America and a former NCC president.

Gary Dorrien, a Union professor who has written a multivolume history of the Protestant left, said Union and Riverside survived the process of “disestablishment” because they saw that liberal Protestantism needed a wider and more inclusive identity.

Union was “the original home and center” of black liberation theology and feminist social ethics, he said. “Union came early to the marginalization of mainline Protestantism and embraced it.” Riverside, meanwhile, became even more of a multiethnic and multiracial church under Forbes, a charismatic black preacher.

The NCC has had the hardest time making the adjustment, Dorrien said. “That problem is built into the organization’s DNA. NCC has been led by people who understand the issue perfectly well, but some of the denominations that comprise the NCC are tormented by their fond memories of being in the mainline.”

Whoever ends up heading the NCC, he said, “will spend a lot of time dealing with the post-mainline-adjustment issue.” *-Religion News Service*