

Judge declines to halt installation of new pastor at Riverside Church: Anger over compensation package

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A New York judge has denied a request by a group of parishioners at the landmark Riverside Church to postpone the installation of the church's new senior pastor because of anger over his compensation package, reported to be worth more than \$600,000.

Manhattan Supreme Court judge Lewis Bart Stone on April 21 denied a request that the installation of Brad Braxton, set for April 26, be delayed.

Stone said he would not take up the case again until after the members of the congregation held a May 3 meeting on the issue of the church's leadership. The judge said different factions of the church need to find "some form of fellowship and reconciliation" in order to resolve what some members say is a serious split among the congregants.

A group of parishioners are angry about Braxton's \$250,000 annual salary, as well as a compensation package that reportedly includes an \$11,500 monthly housing allowance and entertainment and travel allowances, the *New York Daily News* reported April 22.

The package is twice the amount given to Braxton's predecessor, James Forbes Jr., who served as senior minister for nearly 20 years, the newspaper reported.

Petitioners said they would not have approved Braxton's selection as senior minister if they had known the details of his compensation package—described by *Daily News* columnist Juan Gonzalez as "Wall Street-like." They argued that the details of the salary and benefits package were known only to a small group of church lay leaders.

“Where’s the social justice in this?” Diana Solomon-Glover, one of the petitioners, said to Gonzalez. She added that no one on the church’s staff is getting a raise this year.

A statement from Billy E. Jones, chair of the Riverside Church Council, disputed the newspaper’s report that the compensation package includes a “full-time maid,” and said the alleged “private-school tuition” for Braxton’s daughter is actually for Riverside’s own prekindergarten program.

Braxton was selected senior minister at the end of a yearlong search, Jones said. “The senior minister’s full compensation package was presented to the congregation on three separate occasions and was voted on and approved by the congregation in our budget meeting,” he added.

Braxton, a biblical scholar who most recently taught at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, would be the sixth senior pastor of the 78-year-old interdenominational church.

The division at Riverside Church also derives in part from a conservative, traditionalist trend away from liberal activism, the *New York Times* said. Braxton, a Southern Baptist and a former Rhodes scholar, calls himself a “progressive evangelical.”

On pay issues, Scott L. Thumma, a Hartford Institute for Religion Research sociologist who has studied pastor compensation at megachurches, told the *Times* that the average salary in 2008 for 108 megachurch pastors was about \$150,000, topped by the highest at \$300,000. -*Religion News Service*