

## Where Have all the Liberals Gone? — The Riverside Church Seeks New Pastor

Wednesday, May 9, 2007



New York City's famous temple of Protestant liberalism, the [Riverside Church](#), is looking for a new pastor. As *The New York Times* reports, the search committee is not having an easy time of it.

The paper describes the historic church as “the Vatican for America’s mainstream Protestants,” but also as “the capital of a theological movement that has been slowly eroding.”

As reporter Samuel Freedman explains, the church’s storied past has given way to an uncertain future:

*Yet now, as Riverside prepares to search for a new senior minister for only the sixth time in its history, mainstream Protestants are struggling to reverse a decades-long pattern of losing numbers, vitality and influence to their evangelical Protestant competitors. Between 1990 and 2000 alone, mainstream denominations like the Episcopal, Presbyterian and United Methodist Churches and the United Church of Christ lost 5 percent to 15 percent of their members, according to the Association of Religion Data Archives. Riverside is interdenominational but is affiliated with the United Church of Christ and the Baptist Church.*

*The confluence of challenge, opportunity and visibility, then, makes Riverside’s selection of a new leader important not only for the 26 million adherents of mainline Protestantism but also for the shape of American religion as a whole.*

Thus, the Riverside Church’s search for a new pastor becomes a metaphor for the future of liberal Protestantism — and a reminder of its past.

The church was built in order to provide Harry Emerson Fosdick with a place to preach. That explanation is overly simplistic, but accurate. Fosdick’s liberal theology ran into controversy as he was the preaching minister at New York’s First Presbyterian Church. After that controversy cost Fosdick his pulpit, a group of prominent New Yorkers established Riverside Church and John D. Rockefeller, Jr. led in the construction of Riverside’s massive and elegant edifice in Manhattan’s neighborhood of Morningside Heights. The church sits adjacent to New York’s Union Theological Seminary, another symbol of liberal Protestantism.



The church’s main sanctuary is one of the nation’s most beautiful Gothic structures. Fosdick and Rockefeller envisioned the church as a fortress of sorts for Protestant liberalism. As a preacher and controversialist, Fosdick pulled no punches. His denials of central Christian doctrines and his reputation for theological revisionism were infamous. But, at the same time, he was one of the most powerful pulpit orators of his day.

Fosdick defined preaching as “pastoral counseling on a group scale,” and his liberalism set the trajectory for the future. He was followed in the pulpit by Robert James McCracken (1946-1967), a former professor of theology. The Scottish-born McCracken defined his approach as “life-situation” preaching. His tenure, like Fosdick’s, was 21 years.

McCracken was followed by Ernest T. Campbell (1968-1976). Campbell, oddly enough, was a graduate of Bob Jones University. He was later to graduate from Princeton Theological Seminary. Like Fosdick, Campbell considered himself a modernist in theology. He was followed in the pulpit by William Sloane Coffin (1977-1987).



Coffin, like Fosdick, was well-known before assuming the Riverside pulpit. He had previously served as chaplain at Yale University, where his liberal views and anti-war activism were legendary.

The most recent pastor at Riverside was James A. Forbes, Jr. (1989-2007). The church's first African-American pastor, Forbes came from a Pentecostal background in North Carolina. He was Professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary when called to the Riverside pulpit.

Forbes continued the Riverside tradition of theological liberalism and social activism. Reflecting on his pastorate, *The New York Times* observed that he had been successful at integrating the church racially and ethnically, but that he had also run into significant opposition with some members of his "highly educated, highly involved congregation."



The search for Riverside's new pastor reveals the troubles faced by Protestant liberalism. For one thing, there is no long list of well-known preachers. As the paper reports:

*At this early stage, the most notable aspect of the search is the dearth of names being bandied about. If Riverside wanted to break the sex line, it could look to the Rev. Vashti McKenzie, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, or the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook, former president of the Hampton Ministers Conference. Both of these women are African-American, as are two prospective male candidates — the Rev. Calvin O. Butts, pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, and the Rev. Michael Livingston, outgoing president of the National Council of Churches.*

*"Compared to Bill Coffin or Harry Emerson Fosdick, neither Jim Forbes nor anyone else in mainline Protestantism cuts that kind of profile," said Mark Silk, director of the Greenberg Center for the Study of Religion in Public Life at Trinity College in Hartford. "Who are the big dogs today? It's true in Catholicism, too, for that matter. Where's the Spellman or the Cushing? The religious leaders worth listening to have to make the case for themselves — running their own organization, writing books, being in the media."*

The challenge faced by the Riverside Church is indeed the challenge faced by Protestant liberalism as a movement. Once the vital content of the Christian faith is removed, denied, or marginalized, all that remains is a vaguely Christian spirituality and an agenda of social activism.

The problem for liberal churches is this — Americans have learned that they do not need churches for "spirituality" or social activism. They can find these alone, in their yoga group, in political involvement, and in a myriad of other places and institutions. As the Times reports, liberal churches and denominations have been losing members for decades. Movements in such a pattern of decline are not likely to produce long lists of well-known preachers. There is no Harry Emerson Fosdick in the wings.

Beyond this, many liberal churches and denominations have become, in essence, collectives of special interest groups. These different groups are likely to hold very different expectations for a future pastor. As one nominee to the church's pastor search committee admitted, the congregation will have to "face up to the fact that Riverside has had a fairly public reputation of irritating our last two senior ministers to the point they got exasperated."

The basic problem with liberal Protestantism is theological. The movement's subversion of biblical authority and denial of basic orthodoxy lead, inevitably, to a sub-Christian message.

Professor Peter J. Paris of Princeton Theological Seminary once described the Riverside Church as "the world's most prominent institutionalization of Protestant liberalism." Where does it go from here?

