

Michigan Pastor Considers Senate Run

Bishop Keith Butler may campaign for a seat in the U.S. Senate during his state's 2006 election

With hopes of riding the momentum built by "moral values" voters during the November presidential election, a prominent charismatic pastor is considering a run for U.S. Senate in 2006.

Bishop Keith Butler, pastor of one of Detroit's largest churches, Word of Faith International Christian Center, announced Dec. 31 that he was launching an exploratory committee to see if he could drum up enough support for a campaign. A longtime Republican, Butler, 49, said at the center of his platform would be the protection of marriage, religious liberty and national security.

Butler, who won a seat on Detroit's city council in 1989 and served a four-year term, said it would benefit the nation as a whole "to have a senator that protects life, that protects traditional family values and ... understands also that it is important to take care of the poor."

He said his ministry has helped feed and clothe thousands of people since it was founded in 1979.

If he were to run for Senate, and if he were to win, Butler would not be the first minister to hold a seat in Congress. New York pastor Floyd Flake served six terms in Congress, while Oklahoma Baptist minister J.C. Watts spent four terms in the House.

But a win would make Butler only the fifth African American ever elected to the Senate, and only the second black Republican. Still, Butler says his goal is not to make history.

“Should I run, I will not be running as a black Republican,” Butler said. “I will be running as a Republican who believes deeply in protecting the family in our society, securing America, keeping her safe, keeping American jobs. I will look to be a senator for all the people of Michigan and not just one segment of the population.”

He admits, however, that it would not hurt the Republican Party to have another minority senator in Congress.

“I think it will assist the Republican Party to have [Hispanic Sen. Mel Martinez of Florida] and Keith Butler in the United States Senate,” Butler said. “It will make it very difficult for the anti-God and the anti-life [forces] to keep those states blue that are blue. I think Keith Butler [could help] some blue states turn red.”

A native of Detroit, Butler was a liberal arts major at the University of Michigan, studying social sciences and minoring in political science. He worked at IBM and General Motors before he founded Word of Faith with his wife, Deborah, after attending RHEMA Bible Training Center. Today the church has more than 20,000 members and has planted 15 satellite churches across the United States, and in the U.S. Virgin Islands, Scotland and London. Butler also oversees some 950 ministers through his Word of Faith Ministerial Alliance.

Conservative observers believe Democratic Michigan incumbent

Sen. Debbie Stabenow is vulnerable to being unseated in the upcoming election. Michigan has the highest unemployment rate of any state as a result of significant job losses in recent years.

Several names have been tossed around as possible Republican candidates in 2006. Among them are U.S. Rep. Candice Miller, a former Michigan secretary of state; Oakland County Sheriff Michael Broussard; and Domino's Pizza CEO Dave Brandon.

But Butler, too, is seen as a strong contender. Incoming Michigan Republican National Committee chairman Chuck Yob told the Detroit News he believes Butler would make a strong candidate. "He's conservative and formidable," Yob told the News. "He's not well-known statewide, but he's a proven vote-getter in Detroit."

Getting votes outside Detroit may be one of Butler's biggest challenges, though observers say he could overcome that obstacle. "I suspect he'll do the work if he elects to run," said Michigan Republican National Committee spokesman Nate Bailey. "He's a smart man, well spoken, a man of great principle, great faith. I think he would make a fine U.S. senator."

Already anticipating that Butler will run, Traditional Values Coalition (TVC) President Lou Sheldon has pledged to give Butler the maximum campaign contribution both personally and through TVC's political action committee, the Christian Voters Project.

Butler chaired a TVC effort to support the election of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court and in 1991 helped

Sheldon launch the Coalition for the Restoration of the Black Family. Last year the two partnered again to lead a group of African American pastors in opposing same-sex marriage.

"He understands and has lived out in his life conservative biblical principles relevant to the family and marriage, in matters of debt, in matters of defense," Sheldon said. "So on the moral and social and economic issues, he has made his position well known through the years. And he would be a clarion voice in the United States Senate to keep America on those principles that our Founding Fathers gave us."

Though Butler has been a Republican since the early 1980s and worked to get African Americans to vote for Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush, observers believe he could get significant support from Michigan's African American community.

Detroit pastor Marvin Winans, a longtime Democrat, said he plans to support Butler should he run. "We were teenagers together; we grew up here in Detroit," Winans said. "And I know he is a man of integrity. I know he cares for people, and I think he would be a great addition, a sort of conscience, in the Senate."

National Religious Broadcasters chairman Glenn Plummer, who is also president of the Christian Television Network in Detroit, said he believes African Americans' loyalty to Democrats is weakening, especially among Christians. "I think there are a lot of people saying I used to vote Democratic because my mother did, grandparents did. Now people are seriously ... reviewing their position on this."

He added that Butler has earned the respect of many residents

of Detroit, which is roughly 85 percent African American, and he is an independent thinker. Sheldon agreed.

“[Butler] is not in anyone’s pocket. He speaks his own mind and makes decisions based on his own convictions,” said Sheldon, adding that if Butler won 25 percent of Detroit’s black vote, he could win an election.

For now, Butler said his biggest challenge is raising the \$18 million to \$20 million he says it will take to run a campaign. Second only to his need for prayer support, Butler said getting campaign contributions is “absolutely critical. Early money decides whether you’re viable or not.”

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