

National Religious Broadcasters' New President Resigns Over Remarks

Wayne Pederson stepped down under pressure from conservatives when he said the group should depoliticize

After only six weeks in office, the new chief of the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB), a political force during elections and policy-making, stepped down over a controversy that potentially could have divided the organization.

At its 59th annual convention in Nashville, Tenn., in February, the NRB's board of directors voted to accept the resignation of President Wayne Pederson.

The former chair-man of NRB, Pederson offered to leave after his remarks to The Minneapolis Star-Tribune in January that the organization should be less political riled some of the nation's most prominent commentators, including Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and conservative preacher Jerry Falwell. Dobson and Falwell threatened to leave if the organization changed direction.

NRB Chairman Glenn Plummer told The (Nashville) Tennessean that some felt Pederson's comments had "illegitimized their ministries." Plummer added that the dispute had been "a painful time, but one in which healing can come."

In a statement, Pederson said he was sad and disappointed to leave but "would be sadder still if a rift resulted from this situation." He encouraged NRB to "unite around the common cause that brings us together." At press time, NRB had not

appointed an interim president.

A 34-year Christian radio veteran with Northwestern Radio, Pederson, 54, had been appointed president and chief operating officer last year to succeed longtime head E. Brandt Gustavson, who died of pancreatic cancer.

But Pederson caused a stir when he told the Star-Tribune he was concerned that people viewed the NRB as part of the "political right."

"We missed our main calling with that," Pederson said. "But what's probably more disturbing to me is that evangelicals are identified politically more than theologically. We get associated with the far Christian right and marginalized. To me the important thing is to keep the focus on what's important to us spiritually."

Pederson's comments didn't sit well with some who immediately called for his resignation.

"I think this is a tragic thing for the NRB," American Family Association President and founder Don Wildmon said. "Mr. Pederson has criticized those he calls the members of the religious about anybody who has worked hard to make the NRB what it is."

Plummer, the first African American chairman-CEO of NRB, told The Washington Post: "There are land mines in our association, and Wayne basically tripped a wire on one of those land mines."

In late January, the NRB executive committee voted 5-4 against firing Pederson, with Plummer breaking the tie. But NRB officials said the sentiment against Pederson had so escalated that he eventually offered his resignation, even though he kept on fighting for the job.

The day before the start of the convention, the committee voted 7-1 to accept the resignation and end what Plummer indicated were weeks of acrimony. The broader NRB board split 47-36 against Pederson.

"There were individuals—I won't name names—who in my opinion were shameful in the methods they used [in pushing for Pederson's removal]," Plummer told the Post. "We are a Christian, biblical organization, and the Bible is very clear: If you feel that a fellow Christian has offended you, you go to that person first."

Nevertheless, Pederson's removal was applauded. "We're pleased at the outcome," Focus on the Family spokesman Tom Minnery told The Washington Times. "We believe NRB will be stronger in the future."

Family Research Council President Ken Connor also backed the firing in an e-mail notice. Christians and politics are "a match made in heaven," he said. "As people of faith, we shouldn't be duped into believing it's necessary to separate our convictions from civic life."

However, Phil Cooke, a Burbank, TV and film producer and director, was disappointed, noting that Pederson's controversial remarks "were right on target."

“[NRB’s] doing a great job in the political arena, but there is so much more to be done in the media world if we’re going to reach this generation with the gospel,” he said.

He also agreed with Pederson’s perception that NRB is viewed as a far-right organization. “If we’re perceived as a right-wing organization who’s only interested in politics, a significant part of that audience will just turn us off and never listen,” said Cooke, an NRB board member for about three years.

NRB is an association representing more than 1,300 Christian radio and TV stations, program producers, multimedia developers and related organizations worldwide.

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