

The Bishop's Campaign

Michigan pastor Keith Butler, a pro-life Republican, took a big risk when he decided to run for the U.S. Senate. He talked with Charisma about why he's the best man for the job.

As volunteer workers and supporters scurry to transform the Epicurean lounge into a campaign pit stop, a tall gentleman arrives early, commanding attention the moment he enters the room. "Thank you for your support," he says graciously, shaking hands with nearly every person who walks in the room.

Distinguished-looking and seemingly resolute, the man generates a mini-frenzy among members of the Down River Republican Party, a grassroots organization in Trenton, Michigan. "'Hello, everyone. I'm the person replacing [Democratic Senator] Debbie Stabenow,'" he says, to rousing applause.

Bishop Keith A. Butler, pastor of Word of Faith Christian Center (WFCC) in Southfield, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, is used to speaking confidently about his future. Since April 12 when he officially announced his candidacy for U.S. Senate, Butler, 50, has been doing double-duty as both pastor and politician, crisscrossing his state to rally the troops around his cause.

"I will concede no part of the state to her," Butler tells the mostly working-class crowd in Trenton, many of whom are feeling the effects of Michigan's struggling economy. "I will be your next U.S. Senator!"

Though he now faces stiff competition from Republican sheriff Michael Bouchard, who entered the race unexpectedly Oct. 31

and quickly replaced Butler as the frontrunner in the Republican primary, Butler sent a wave of excitement through charismatic circles when he announced his candidacy.

Pastor Marvin L. Winans of Perfecting Church in Detroit says Butler would be good for Michigan because he genuinely cares about people. He says he has no doubt African-Americans will support Butler, though most are Democrats.

"He will run on his record," says Winans, who has known Butler since the two were teenagers. "He is a man of integrity, principle, and he wasn't born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He knows what it means to struggle."

Attendee Nancy Richards, 75, says Butler represents views that are most important to her. "I heard him speak at a businessman's luncheon, and the Lord told me Keith Butler was a spiritual general," she says.

Staunchly pro-life and an unwavering supporter of traditional marriage, Butler is not running for the notoriety. At 21,000 members, his church is now one of the largest and most prominent in Detroit. It has planted 15 satellite congregations across the country and as far away as England and Scotland, generates \$30 million a year, and employs a staff of more than 250. In its 27 years of ministry, Butler says Word of Life has helped feed and clothe thousands of people.

Though he has been working outside traditional political circles, Butler says he is in tune with Michigan's grassroots. "Voters are sending someone to Washington who will advance their interests, whether [they'll] have oil to heat their

homes,” Butler says. “That’s what will determine the outcome.”

If he wins, the University of Michigan graduate will become the first black Republican from Michigan elected to the Senate, and the only charismatic pastor to win a seat traditionally held by Democrats.

But it won’t be the first time Butler has overcome barriers to fulfill his calling to politics. In election year 1984, he was the Michigan state chairman of Blacks for Reagan and Bush, and in 1986 he worked as coalition director for Bill Lucas, who ran for governor.

In 1989 Butler ran for office himself and was elected to Detroit’s city council, becoming the first Republican councilman elected to office by Democratic voters. But after serving a four-year term, he decided not to run for re-election. He opted, instead, to put his children first.

“I wanted [my son] to know that I would be there for him every game,” he says. “It was important to my wife and [me] that I be a part of my children’s lives.”

Butler’s hard work and commitment to his party later opened the door for him to become Deputy Chairman of the Republican National Convention and a member of the GOP’s national platform committee in 1992. In 2000, he served as co-chairman of the Republican Party to help with the re-election campaign of President George W. Bush. Though Sen. John Kerry won Michigan, the GOP saw a small increase in Bush support.

Today, Butler is combining his experience as CEO of Word of Faith with his years of involvement in local, state and

national government to wage his own campaign. Charisma met with Butler at his headquarters in Southfield to discuss his plan to make America better.

The Gospel and the GOP

At 23, a driven Keith Butler was on course to fulfill his call not just to ministry but to the pastorate. Butler and his wife, Deborah, had been greatly influenced by the late Kenneth Hagin Sr. and were sensing the call to tell others about salvation, faith and God's ability to transform lives by starting a church.

In 1979, the couple founded WFCC. Since then, the Butlers and their three adult children, Keith Butler II, Michelle and Kristina, have all graduated from Rhema Bible Training Center in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Butler was a registered Democrat and had become intrigued with politics. Then in 1980 he got his hands on a platform that explained the beliefs and practices of both the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. He read it and compared both parties' values to his own. "I was a Republican!" he recalls. "That was a tremendous shock to me."

Like most African-Americans, Butler was raised a Democrat and was faithful to the party. In fact, he says he doesn't remember ever meeting a Republican until he went to college.

Though the pastor officially switched his affiliation in 1982, moving from an African-American-supported party to the predominantly white, conservative GOP was tough. "The way I felt about it at the time was I didn't leave the Democratic

Party, it had left me,” he says.

Still, Butler viewed himself as an orphan. His new party was notorious for not being inclusive of blacks and other minorities. Yet he says he couldn’t deny his convictions about the sanctity of human life.

“The Republicans were right on with their values, but my understanding of them was that they would not welcome me,” Butler says. “At the same time, I couldn’t support what the Democrats were standing for. I really felt like an orphan. It took a while.”

Butler opted to become an agent of change, and in the last 25 years he has gained the respect of Republicans, Democrats, blacks, whites and other groups in his city. Since he began his Senate run, Butler has received endorsements from Republican supporters across his state and from party members in Washington, Michigan Attorney General Mike Cox to former Rep. J.C. Watts.

According to recent polls, some Republicans withdrew support when Bouchard entered the race in late October. Before, observers said Butler had a strong chance of besting opponent Jerry Zandstra, a minister and director of the Acton Institute, a Christian-based think tank in Grand Rapids. Butler says D.C.

Republicans who were “uncomfortable with his candidacy” encouraged Bouchard to run, promising him financial support.

Bill Ballinger, publisher of Inside Michigan Politics, said Republicans want someone with experience. Although Butler has

been a faithful GOP supporter, Ballinger foresees a challenge for the candidate in the state's August primary. "He has impeccable credentials ... but he hasn't held an office in 17 years," Ballinger says. "Bouchard is the strongest, potentially, because he is a proven vote-getter."

Butler disagrees with those who question his experience. "Not only am I a pastor, I'm also the president and CEO of a middle-size corporation [with] 252 employees, and I've been running [Faith Christian Academy] for 23 years," he says. "... I am as successful as anyone in America in my field so this shows I am qualified."

Butler points out that Democratic Sen. Carl Levin was elected to the Senate in 1978 after having served only on the Detroit City Council. "If I'm not qualified for the United States Senate, then neither was Carl Levin," he says.

Despite the politicking, Hester Wheeler, director of the Detroit branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, says Butler's candidacy is historic. "I don't think there has ever been an African-American in Michigan to run for the Senate."

An Eye on Washington

Though there are challenges, Butler still has his eye on Washington, D.C. He says the economy will determine the outcome of the election, not polls.

Butler believes his platform could help revitalize America and the Great Lakes state. Michigan reportedly has the lowest income growth of any state and the highest unemployment rate in the country. In June General Motors, which is based in

Detroit, announced plans to cut 25,000 jobs by 2008, a loss of 17 percent of its workforce.

The Rev. Lou Sheldon, president of the Traditional Values Coalition, a Christian lobbying organization based in Washington, D.C., believes Butler understands the critical issues. "He knows the potential bankruptcy social security faces; he understands education ... he understands international issues such as trade balance, war and terrorism and the right to bear arms; he understands why right to life is so crucial," Sheldon says.

And while some Democratic opponents may take jabs at the prosperity gospel popular in Word-Faith circles, Sheldon notes that Butler will take a cut in pay if he wins the election. "The most revealing fact is that Keith Butler will take an 80 percent decrease in pay over a six-year Senate term," he adds.

At press time, Butler had raised \$1.5 million for his campaign, but he predicts it will take some \$8 million to pay for TV commercials, radio spots and other media. Despite contributions from ministry friends such as Sheldon, Butler's campaign coffer doesn't outpace Bouchard's.

Still, Butler believes he has the strongest vision for his state and the nation. He wants better education for America's children-one that acknowledges God and embraces accountability and morality. "Education is the single most important equalizer. It requires four essentials to be successful," Butler says.

"We need parental involvement, kids who are hungry to learn, qualified teachers and no union control," he says.

“Unionization has caused us to do things that are crazy.”

He supports the president’s No Child Left Behind Act and says he’s for parents using systems that could help them educate their children, including school vouchers.

During campaign stops, he tells attendees that he’s in favor of a flat tax because it yields more economic growth and that he supported the president’s 2003 tax cut. But he considers the right to life to be the single most important issue. “What can be greater than whether or not a person is allowed to live or die?” he asks.

Because he pays \$100,000 a month in healthcare for church employees, Butler says he knows what it will take to make healthcare manageable and affordable. He attributes the soaring costs of care to an overused system and to consumers who are disconnected from services and fees.

Butler proposes a healthcare savings account that would allow Americans to manage their own healthcare. Both employees and employers would make deposits into the employee’s account. “If you know how much money you have, you’re going to want to know the cost [of care] because that savings account is not infinite,” he says.

According to the GOP hopeful, there must be new leadership in Washington, D.C., if America is to remain strong and competitive. It’s a message he carries with him on the campaign trail.

“You don’t have to be a rocket scientist to figure out the results of liberal policies,” Butler says. “... For me it’s not

about party at all. It's about what's right, what's wrong, what works, what doesn't, what helps humanity, and what's killing it. That's what matters to me."

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The Political Power of Pentecostals

African-American Pentecostals and charismatics are wielding greater political influence than ever before. But their views don't fit squarely into either political party.

Though he may be the first charismatic pastor to run for Senate, Bishop Keith Butler is just one of a growing number of black Pentecostal and charismatic ministers who are getting involved in politics.

Sought out for their community development and family revitalization initiatives-along with their moral conservatism-black Pentecostals and charismatics have gained unprecedented access to the White House in recent years.

A letter from Bishop Charles Blake, pastor of West Angeles Church of God in Christ in California, led to a meeting in May with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice that focused on increasing black ministers' involvement in African foreign policy. Attendees included Bishop T.D. Jakes, the Rev. Eugene Rivers and Bishop Eddie Long.

Previously, Bishop Harry Jackson Jr. of Hope Christian Church in Maryland assembled 100 black ministers at pastor Fred Price's Crenshaw Christian Center in Los Angeles to urge their

resistance to gay marriage. During the February 2005 conference, the inaugural event of his newly formed High Impact Leadership Coalition, Jackson unveiled his Black Contract With America on Moral Values, which outlined a six-pronged agenda for African-Americans that included such issues as family restoration, prison reform and wealth creation. He has since held similar summits in New York and Philadelphia.

In June, Rivers, pastor of Azusa Christian Community in Boston, unveiled God's Gift, a document that affirms traditional marriage and outlines a plan to reduce the number of out-of-wedlock births and single-parent households among African-Americans. Meanwhile, pastors such as Long have led local marches to rally Christians around a "moral agenda" that includes opposition to gay marriage.

Though black Pentecostals have always worked to influence social change, observers say this kind of political engagement is different. "Gay marriage has galvanized African-American Pentecostals like no other issue," says Tony Carnes, a Columbia University sociologist and head of the International Research Institute on Values Changes.

In 2004, he partnered with A.R. Bernard, pastor of Christian Cultural Center, a predominantly black charismatic church in New York, to study voter trends among evangelicals, charismatics and Pentecostals in their state. They found a subtle move toward conservatism among African-American Christians in New York, with a 6 percent increase over 1997 in the number of registered Republicans and a 12 percent decline in the number of Democrats.

During the 2004 election, 11 percent of African-Americans supported President Bush, a 2 percent increase over 2000. In

the battleground state of Ohio, black support for Bush increased by 5 percent. Melissa Harris-Lacewell, Ph.D., assistant professor of political science at the Center for the Study of Race, Politics and Culture at the University of Chicago, says the rise could have been part of a normal variation in the black vote. But she says black pastors also may have played a part.

“If there were simply a few large and powerful black churches where the minister of that church had made it clear ... that that was sort of the appropriate Christian way to vote, then you would see ... that jump [in Bush support],” she says.

Carnes says the most influential black Pentecostal and charismatic ministers are part of the “post civil rights generation.” Their agenda is primarily to rebuild families, revitalize communities and build black wealth, usually by encouraging entrepreneurship. Because they believe strengthening families will help bring success in other areas, Carnes says, they see gay marriage as an assault on their goals.

But though they agree with conservatives about gay marriage, observers say black Pentecostals and charismatics aren’t in Republicans’ pockets. Concern for social justice is what drives their community work. Rivers, who was profiled in Newsweek for his work mobilizing pastors to resist gangs in Boston, hosted Democratic Sen. Hilary Clinton at a fundraiser in January 2005, then met with White House officials a week later.

“Black Pentecostals, along with some others within the black church, are really bridge people ... and they’re not comfortable in either camp,” says David Daniels III, Ph.D., an ordained

Pentecostal minister and a professor of church history at McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago. "When they deal with liberals, they agree with them on certain issues and challenge them on others. When they deal with conservatives, they agree with them on certain issues and challenge them on others. Consequently, they may be able to come up with an agenda that might get us past this impasse."

Because of their rising influence, that agenda may get a better hearing than it would have 50 years ago when the most prominent black churches in many cities were Baptist. Today the most influential black churches in many communities are Pentecostal or charismatic. Observers such as Robert Franklin, Ph.D., a professor of social ethics at Emory University and a respected scholar on black church issues, believe these ministers may one day wield the greatest political influence in the black church.

"Some black Pentecostals, by no means all, are experiencing what their white evangelical counterparts began to experience just prior to President Reagan's election, namely their enormous political potential to influence elections and policy directions," Franklin says. "The evangelicals created the Moral Majority. So far, black Pentecostals haven't evolved to create a similar ... vehicle."

Without that infrastructure, observers say, black Pentecostals and charismatics are unlikely to gain strong grass-roots support. Others worry that without a clear agenda, their opposition to gay marriage will overshadow their social justice concerns.

"The Bible says all unrighteousness is sin," says Virginia state Sen. Yvonne B. Miller, a longtime member of the Church

of God in Christ. "Exploitation of the poor is sin. Paying low wages to people just because you can is sin. Everything contrary to the will of God is sin."

Rivers believes political independence may be black Pentecostals' greatest strength. "We're pushing the envelope discreetly," he says. "Amazing things are happening that nobody saw coming."

Adrienne S. Gaines