

Pastor-Turned-Congressman Caught Up in Massive Election Fraud Controversy

The Rev. Mark Harris, a Southern Baptist pastor turned aspiring congressman, is facing allegations of election fraud in North Carolina, where authorities are investigating whether an operative for his campaign paid workers to take absentee ballots from voters illegally.

The probe is centered on Leslie McCrae Dowless, who was hired by the conservative political group Red Dome to work on voter turnout for Harris' campaign for the U.S. House seat from the Charlotte area. State officials are following reports that Dowless led a team of workers in Bladen County to collect absentee ballots from voters—an act that may violate North Carolina laws that only allow individual voters or close relatives to mail a ballot.

Authorities are especially interested in whether ballots taken from voters who backed Harris' opponent, Democrat and Marine Corps veteran Dan McCready, were ever returned to election officials. State data show Bladen County saw unusually high numbers of mail-in ballot requests compared with other parts of the state, but also reported unusually high numbers of unreturned ballots, especially among African-American and Native American voters.

The current vote tally has Harris, who stepped down as pastor of Charlotte's First Baptist Church in June 2017 to run for the House, beating McCready by a margin of just 905 votes.

Reports indicate that Harris, who ran for U.S. Senate in 2014 and lost a close GOP congressional primary in 2016 by 134 votes, knew Dowless at least since 2017, when the pastor introduced Dowless to a church member who was running for

Charlotte City Council. According to *The Charlotte Observer*, Harris subsequently told the church member that Dowless was known for getting out absentee votes.

Dowless, who has denied any wrongdoing, is also known to law enforcement due to earlier convictions for fraud, perjury and other crimes in the early 1990s, for which he served six months in prison, according to court records.

Harris' campaign did not return a request for comment.

The allegations are awkward for Harris, who made a name for himself in the Tar Heel State as a conservative crusader.

He campaigned in 2012 for North Carolina's Amendment 1, which banned same-sex marriage in the state; the measure passed the same day Harris was elected president of North Carolina's Baptist State Convention.

He also was a vocal supporter of a bill mandating that men's and women's restrooms in government buildings be used according to a person's sex as identified on the individual's birth certificate. When a repeal effort was mounted, he fought to preserve the law. (Compromise legislation was passed in March 2017.)

In 2017, Harris championed the idea of pastors becoming involved in politics, telling the Baptist Press that "there continues to be a tremendous need (in politics) for voices that are going to stand on righteousness, that recognize where we are moving as a nation."

His bid for Congress was backed by Tami Fitzgerald, executive director of the North Carolina Values Coalition and trustee for the SBC's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

McCready, Harris' 2018 Democratic opponent, is also a Christian. His campaign website notes that he converted to the faith while serving in Iraq a decade ago and was baptized in

water from the Euphrates River.

But Harris' religious background, which includes a Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry from Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, proved troublesome on the campaign trail.

In July, the liberal political action committee American Bridge unearthed a 2013 sermon in which Harris questioned women's desire to pursue a career in lieu of "biblical womanhood." He prefaced the sermon with a prayer saying, "Father, I realize that this message today is not politically correct in 2013. ... But Lord, you have called me to declare 'thus sayeth the Lord God' in accordance to your word, and I can do nothing less than just share the word that is here before us."

A group of clergy who affirm LGBTQ identities and relationships came out against Harris during his campaign, citing his support for laws they see as discriminatory. The Council on American-Islamic Relations also called on the North Carolina Republican Party to repudiate previous sermons, in which he described Islam as "dangerous" and argued that peace between Israelis and the Palestinians cannot be achieved until Jews and Muslims accept Jesus Christ as their savior.

Asked about the controversy, Harris' former church said it had no statement on the matter but noted that Dowless is not listed as a member of the church and isn't known to attend services there. {eo}

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