

Controversial Pastor Hired to Lead the Late Eddie Long's Congregation

An Atlanta-area black megachurch led by the late Bishop Eddie Long has announced it has chosen a new leader, plucked from another black megachurch, as its pastor.

The Rev. Jamal-Harrison Bryant, pastor of Empowerment Temple in Baltimore, will move to Lithonia, Ga., to assume the position of senior pastor of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church. He will also be shifting from an African Methodist Episcopal congregation to one affiliated with a Baptist network.

"Rev. Dr. Jamal-Harrison Bryant embodies the rare balance of spiritual gifts and practical educational experiences that connects pastoral leadership and discipleship teaching with prophetic preaching and courageous social action," New Birth said in a news release on Monday (Nov. 19).

The transition comes months after Long's first successor resigned after serving for about a year and a half. Bishop Stephen A. Davis said in June that he would return to serving the branch of New Birth in Birmingham, Ala.

Long died in January 2017 at age 63 after fighting health issues for several months. When he became pastor of the church in 1987, it had about 300 members. Its membership reached more than 25,000. When the church announced Davis' departure in June, the membership had dropped to slightly more than 10,000, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported.

"One of the big difficulty with churches that have had nationally significant pastors is precisely the problem of continuity," said the Rev. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, professor

of African-American studies and sociology at Colby College.

And the issue of succession, no matter the prominence or the size of the church, becomes an “incredibly painful problem” when a pastor dies.

“Even though pastors are professional, it is like losing a family member,” she said, and a successor often winds up preaching with “some kind of enshrined shadow or ghost sitting or standing over the person.”

Bryant started his Baltimore church in 2000 with 43 members and, according to its website, now has more than 10,000. It is affiliated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church, an historic black denomination that celebrated its bicentennial in 2016.

Bishop Frank M. Reid, who is in charge of the African Methodist Episcopal Church’s ecumenical affairs, said a shift of a megachurch pastor from an AME-affiliated congregation to New Birth would be a new dynamic that would have to be worked out between the pastor and the leader of the former AME district where the pastor was previously located.

“We would have to ask Jamal, ‘Are you leaving the denomination or are you maintaining your ties with the AME Church or are you turning in your ordination papers?’” Reid said. “But that would be between him and the bishop of the district.”

Gilkes said the AME Church, which includes bishops, is organized differently from Baptist churches, which traditionally recognize only the offices of pastor and deacon. But Long became a bishop of the Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship International, a 24-year-old network of churches, in the 1990s.

Both Long and Bryant encountered controversy even as they watched their congregations grow under their leadership.

Long faced suits, settled in 2012, from young men who accused him of using money and gifts to coerce them into sexual relationships. In 2011, Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa concluded a three-year probe of six ministries including New Birth and found that Long's staffers declined to respond to most of their questions, including the amount of the senior pastor's salary.

Bryant and his ex-wife, Gizelle Bryant, who later became a star in "Real Housewives of the Potomac," divorced in 2009 after he had an extramarital affair. In 2015, he announced a run for Congress only to end his campaign eight days later.

New Birth said Bryant's first Sunday as "senior pastor elect" will be Dec. 9. {eo}

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