

Evangelical leader forced to resign

Adelle M. Banks Religion News Service | Dec. 12, 2008

WASHINGTON -- The top Washington lobbyist for the National Association of Evangelicals, who had already faced criticism for his embrace of environmental activism, resigned Thursday (Dec. 11) after signaling support for same-sex civil unions.

The Rev. Richard Cizik, who had worked in the NAE's Washington office for 28 years, resigned after being harshly criticized for the civil union comments and saying he voted for President-elect Barack Obama in the Virginia primary despite Obama's support of abortion rights.

NAE President Leith Anderson said Cizik's comments in a Dec. 2 interview with National Public Radio's "Fresh Air" program were problematic because they did not reflect the views of many NAE member organizations.

"I think that what people did communicate ... is that he cannot continue as a spokesperson for NAE, and the implication of that is that he resign," Anderson said in an interview Thursday.

Anderson, a Minnesota megachurch pastor, said he and Cizik talked for "hours" Wednesday after Cizik returned from an overseas trip and flew to Minneapolis. Both men came to a joint decision that Cizik needed to resign.

Cizik, 58, who was the NAE's vice president for governmental affairs and public face in the media and on Capitol Hill, declined to comment on Thursday.

In the NPR interview, Cizik spoke on an array of topics, from gay marriage to abortion to last month's elections. The controversy marked the second time in as many years that his comments sparked an outcry from more conservative Christian leaders.

"It's possible for me to disagree with a candidate on high-profile issues and still believe that, on the basis of character or philosophy, he's the better of the two candidates," Cizik said in the interview.

"So, in this case, it would be possible, as evangelicals did, to disagree with Barack Obama on same-sex marriage and abortion and yet vote for him. We know they did, not because of those positions ... but in spite of those positions."

In the NPR interview, Cizik said he voted for Obama in the Virginia primary but did not disclose how he voted in the general election. He also said his views about gays and marriage were evolving.

"I'm shifting, I have to admit," he said. "In other words, I would be willing to say I believe in civil unions. I don't officially support redefining marriage from its traditional definition, I don't think."

Critics from conservative groups, including Concerned Women for America and the Institute on Religion and Democracy, blasted Cizik, saying he didn't represent "biblical orthodoxy" or "millions of other evangelicals."

"He would say one thing to liberal audiences and say something different to NAE-type audiences," said Wendy

Wright, president of Concerned Women for America, whose organization is not a member of the NAE.

"So the NPR interview took the cloak off and revealed Rich Cizik's true positions that ... he has apparently held for quite a while. This is a good move forward for NAE. NAE needs a representative who is passionate about the biblical principles that bind NAE members together and they need a voice on Capitol Hill who truly represents their constituency."

Evangelical leaders, including Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, had called for Cizik to be fired in 2007 because of his "relentless campaign" against global warming.

At that time, the NAE board stood by Cizik and reaffirmed the group's commitment to caring for the environment that was included in a 2003 statement on "public engagement."

In the interview with "Fresh Air," Cizik said Christians should care about both family and environmental issues.

"It's strategically important for Christians to care for this earth, just as it's important for Christians to care for the family," he said. "These are equals. They're both part of God's concern. They're both part of his heart."

Asked if Cizik's resignation puts the NAE in a difficult situation just two years after former NAE president Ted Haggard resigned because of a sex and drug scandal, Anderson said the two departures were not related.

"They're so totally unrelated and so completely different that it's a connection that I don't even make in my mind," he said. "Any connection that anybody would make would be people that read news stories every few years and are connecting dots that are different. I just don't connect those dots."

Anderson said despite the recent controversy, Cizik made significant contributions to the evangelical umbrella organization. Cizik was outspoken on issues ranging from sexual trafficking to religious persecution and was instrumental in writing the NAE's position statement on civic responsibility.

"He has done a great deal of good," said Anderson. "I think the unfortunate part of this is that the way he spoke and what he said in this interview hurt his credibility as a spokesperson."

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