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Pastor pulls out of inauguration after anti-gay sermon furor

David Gibson Religion News Service | Jan. 11, 2013

The evangelical pastor chosen by President Barack Obama to deliver the benediction at his inauguration ceremonies withdrew on Thursday following a furor over a sermon from the mid-1990s in which he denounced the gay rights movement and advocated efforts to turn gays straight.

In a statement, the Rev. Louie Giglio of Atlanta, founder of the Passion Conferences for college-age Christians, did not directly renounce his remarks on gays but indicated that fighting gay rights is not one of his "priorities."

Still, because of the controversy -- which erupted Wednesday after the liberal group Think Progress posted audio of the sermon -- Giglio said that "it is likely that my participation, and the prayer I would offer, will be dwarfed by those seeking to make their agenda the focal point of the inauguration."

"Clearly, speaking on this issue has not been in the range of my priorities in the past 15 years," said Giglio, who was chosen to deliver the blessing at the Jan. 21 ceremony because of his longtime work against human trafficking.

"Instead, my aim has been to call people to ultimate significance as we make much of Jesus Christ. Neither I, nor our team, feel it best serves the core message and goals we are seeking to accomplish to be in a fight on an issue not of our choosing, thus I respectfully withdraw my acceptance of the president's invitation."

Addie Whisenant, a spokeswoman for the Presidential Inaugural Committee, said in a statement that organizers were not aware of Giglio's past comments when he was chosen, reportedly with Obama's personal input. Giglio's remarks "don't reflect our desire to celebrate the strength and diversity of our country at this Inaugural," the statement said.

Giglio's exit was swift, coming just 24 hours after the sermon went public. That illustrated not only a concern that nothing disturb the civic ritual of the presidential inauguration, but also showed how unsettled the nation remains on gay rights despite -- or perhaps because of -- the rapid changes in public opinion.

Four years ago when Obama chose California megachurch pastor Rick Warren to deliver the inaugural blessing, there was criticism because of his opposition to gay rights: The best-selling evangelical author had worked to pass Proposition 8, which ended gay marriages in California. But calls for him to step aside were ignored by both Warren and Obama.

Obama's pick for defense secretary, former Republican Sen. Chuck Hagel, has faced criticism for his comments in 1998 about an openly gay Clinton nominee for ambassador. Hagel has since apologized and renounced those remarks as "insensitive."

The Giglio dust-up is providing another opportunity for each side to highlight its message.

"Are all orthodox clergy now to be banished from civic life if they openly affirm their faith's teachings about

marriage and sexual ethics?" said Mark Tooley, president of the conservative Institute on Religion and Democracy.

"Are only clergy from declining liberal denominations now acceptable according to hyper political correctness? Will the same standard also apply to Muslims and members of other faiths who don't subscribe to the views of Western secular elites?"

Gay rights groups, on the other hand, welcomed Giglio's departure and pushed the administration to name a gay-friendly replacement.

The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation posted a list of 10 candidates, including Jay Bakker, son of former televangelists Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, and Rachel Held Evans, a popular evangelical author and blogger.

Whisenant said the inaugural would now look for a replacement for Giglio and "will ensure their beliefs reflect this administration's vision of inclusion and acceptance for all Americans."

The ceremonies will already feature a reading from poet Richard Blanco, a Cuban-American gay man, and the Lesbian and Gay Band Association of St. Louis will be marching in the inaugural parade.

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