



Carlton Pearson speaks on Obama, marriage equality and a 'gospel of inclusion'

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Pearson: This is the last major civil rights frontier

CHICAGO, IL -- When Chicago-based minister Carlton Pearson heard last week that President Obama had told ABC News that he supported gay marriage, Pearson said, "I was thrilled, but not surprised."

Pearson stopped and rethought his words for a moment. "Well, I was surprised—surprised that the President would bring this up before the election in November," he said, laughing. "But this is to get this conversation generated now, since, as we've just learned, there are plans on the Right to use the Church to rally against Obama."

Pearson, who is now a minister with New Dimensions Chicago in Morgan Park, has for several years been an outspoken advocate for gay marriage and other gay rights issues. He has similarly preached for gay tolerance within the evangelical movement.

Pearson calls President Obama "the perfect president" to make the call for supporting gay marriage, going so far as to compare it to the Emancipation Proclamation. "Obama has said that Lincoln is his favorite president, and now he is following that same natural trend that Lincoln did," he added.

"This is the last major civil rights frontier," he added, emphasizing that there is a natural progression from race-based rights issues to those focused around same-sex relations. "When the most powerful leader in the free world says this, it's an incredibly strong statement—this is the most progress that's been made in the history of this planet."

Pearson has long advocated for what he calls a "gospel of inclusion," an interpretation of scripture that suggests that all of humanity, no matter their religion or actions, is eventually reconciled with God. It is not a position that endeared Pearson with his colleagues in the evangelical movement. After explaining his doctrine to the Joint College of African-American Pentecostal Bishops in early 2004, Pearson was branded a heretic and ousted from his ministry, Higher Dimensions Evangelistic Center, one of the largest megachurch congregations in Oklahoma. He came to Chicago to become a minister at the Christ Universal Temple in 2009, but left the position in 2011.

He's long been concerned with the lack of acceptance shown towards LGBTs within African American church communities, and said he hopes Obama's support might reverse some of that.

That wariness, however, has deep origins, Pearson said. The first could be traced to sexual violence that male slaves often faced at the hands of their owners. "There was an unspoken abuse that occurred back then," according to Pearson. "It was kept very quiet, and there was a perception that if you yielded to this violence you were somehow less manly."

The knowledge of that violence in time grew into an overall hostility towards homosexuality. That hostility only accelerated, as African Americans became a largely Christian demographic. "Then it had become a sin to these folks," he said. "The perception was that gay men were promiscuous and sleeping around, and that we had to find some way to restrain them."

But changing times have given way to a new reality, Pearson said. "When you start finding that there are respectable gay teachers, doctors—anyone you can think of—now looking for marriage, you see that it's not just President Obama who has been evolving on this issue."

Many of the theological underpinnings preachers use to denounce homosexuality are based on misreadings, he said. "There's the scriptural discussion of Sodom and Gomorrah, for example—the Sodomites believed in idolizing the body over God, and the Bible denounces the sin of idolatry. Many Christians and preachers misinterpret that as a denunciation of homosexuality."

Many preachers in African American church communities, he believes, do indeed see and understand that the time has come for change. "But a lot of them are forced to say things in public that are different than what they believe in private," Pearson said.

Should those preachers stop being afraid to preach what they believe in, Pearson foresees a new era of not just tolerance but vitality. "It will be a new kind of freedom," he said. "We have lost all of our authenticity by impersonating these (indoctrinated) zombies."

He added that the Church has much to do to regain the trust of men and women who have been marginalized by their teachings. "They still are suspicious, and for good reason; it's up to us to say, 'we welcome you and we want you back.'"

Pearson acknowledges that that's easier said than done at many churches. "Black people have known that for many years—the sign outside can say 'all are welcome' but it takes a lot for everyone to actually feel welcome. There'll probably never be blanket acceptance for people; it'll be another 50 years or 100 years—one or two generations—before we can work through all of our issues."

He is currently looking for a space in which to expand his ministry, and said he looked forward to officiating at the wedding of Randy Roberts Potts, the grandson of Pearson's mentor, Oral Roberts. Potts came out in the early 2000s and [spoke at Pearson's Inclusion 2011 Conference](#) last year.

Pearson said that this would be his first time officiating at a same-sex wedding and was excited. "I have blessed babies, barns and bulls, so why not a same-sex union?"

He holds out hope for more vibrant and welcoming religious communities that understand and celebrate the diversities of human nature. "We are sexual, sensual, social and spiritual beings—there is a great art and science to living," Pearson said.