

Pastor launches bid for national NAACP chair

Contributed by RENEE MICHELLE HARRIS

After announcing plans to retire at the end of his term in 2009, Julian Bond, chairman of the national board of directors for the NAACP, changed his mind and was re-elected to his post last year.

Bond has made no public statement regarding his intentions for the chairmanship this year; but at least one person has stepped forward to challenge the 69-year old for the seat.

In a webcast on Feb. 2, the Rev. Wendell Anthony, president of the Detroit branch of the NAACP, announced his intention to become the next chairman of the board of the country's oldest civil rights organization.

In a veiled statement that appeared to be directed at Bond, Anthony said, "The NAACP is not any one certain person's organization. It is the people's organization. I decided to offer myself as service for the organization after 18 years of being president of the largest branch of the NAACP in the country.

That's the Detroit branch."

Bond has been board chairman since 1998. In his 2008 retirement announcement, Bond said it was time to let younger leaders take over the NAACP. With Bond's strong support, Benjamin T. Jealous, 36, was chosen in May 2009 as president and CEO of the NAACP, becoming the youngest president in the national organization's history.

Jealous' selection was a clear response to criticism that the organization is no longer relevant, and that it is out of touch with the nation's younger generations.

Due to the snowstorm in the Baltimore area, the national office is closed, so neither Bond nor Jealous could be reached for comment.

Rosalyn M. Brock, vice chairman for the national NAACP, is considered by many to be Bond's natural successor and the youthful leadership that the organization needs to take it to the next level.

She made history in February 2001 when she was unanimously elected vice chairman at the age of 35, making her the youngest person and the first woman elected to the post in the organization's history.

Anthony took issue with the perceived desire for a youthful, perhaps female chairperson.

"It's not about personality. It's not about male versus female. It's not about young versus old. We need all of that. We need the experience, we need the energized. We need all of us to work together as an NAACP family," he said.

Sitting in his multimillion dollar church, Anthony used the edifice as an example of his ability to get things done.

"This is a \$35 million institution. I know how to build institutions. Prior to this, this was a trash heap. It's built on a house of dope, now it stands as a house of hope," he said.

Although the NAACP's decision on the chairperson is scheduled for Feb. 20, at the next board meeting, there have been no public pronouncements supporting Bond's continued leadership. He said in a letter last year that his decision to once again seek the post came after overwhelming board support.

"The outpouring of support from a supermajority of Board members – and from State and Regional Leadership and rank-and file members – asking me to run again for NAACP Board Chairman has convinced me to change my mind," Bond said in a February 2009 letter to the board, effectively reversing his decision to retire.

Anthony is a formidable candidate. The 60-year old pastor leads what many say is the most active NAACP branch in the country. The branch counts 40,000 members and, according to Professor Ronald Walters, director of the African American Leadership Institute at the University of Maryland – which provides research and training for African-American leaders – the Detroit NAACP raises more money during its annual Freedom Fund dinner – between \$1.2 million and \$1.6 million – than any other in the country.

"We have raised since 1993 nearly \$30 million for the association in terms of the general money that we've raised, and we contributed nearly \$3 million from the Detroit branch to the national association," Anthony said.

The Rev. James Holley, pastor of Historic Little Rock Baptist Church in Detroit, lost a hotly contested race for the Detroit NAACP presidency to Anthony in 1994.

Holley told the Detroit Free Press that, "He really should be president" of the national organization. "At least he can raise the money."

Anthony said his ability to raise money is not the only quality he brings.

"I want a more engaged NAACP. I want to provide more resources to our local units, because the local units are the lifeblood of the NAACP. We need to hear new voices around the table to make decisions about what happens with the organization...If we keep doing the same thing in the same way, we will never change," Anthony said.

Yet Anthony's rapid progress in Detroit may have rankled feathers at the national level.

Anthony told the Detroit Free Press in a 2007 interview that, "I think there was a time period when the national office felt we moved too fast...It's not that we were moving too fast – we felt like they weren't moving fast enough. Rather than make us the renegade, make us the standard."

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Photo: Rev. Wendell Anthony

