

# The Many Faces of Rev. Calvin O. Butts III: Educational Leader, Religious Minister and Political Activist

By Ken Schachter

The Rev. Calvin O. Butts III preaches to three congregations.

As a minister, he sings the lord's praise with the members of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, a nearly two-century-old congregation whose leaders have included Adam Clayton Powell Sr. and Jr. As president of the State University of New York College at Old Westbury, he is seeking to put the school's tattered past in the rear view mirror. And as a leader of a key voting bloc in New York City's ethnic and racial political stew, Butts acts as rainmaker who can reach across party lines.



How does Butts reconcile his roles at a high-profile church in Harlem and a state college nestled on a former Gold Coast estate?

"I don't see it as a juggling act," he said. "I see each complementing the other. I really view my work here as I view my work at Abyssinian — as a calling."

Butts's devotion was tested from the start at Old Westbury. When he was offered the presidency, the college was engulfed in public firestorms.

Faculty was rebelling against a plan, later scrapped, to sell off about half of the 605-acre campus. Though Butts, who earned a bachelor's degree at Morehouse College, a master of divinity from Union Theological Seminary, and a doctorate in church and public policy from Drew University, had some public support on being offered the presidency in 1999 ("Old Westbury has a prayer," said a Daily News editorial), some faculty bridled at a search that they felt circumvented guidelines and failed to seek their input.

More headlines blared when two brothers from Huntington, who had been major fund-raisers for Gov. George Pataki, were charged with misrepresenting their track record to win a \$27.9-million contract to build dormitories at the college. Though fired by the Dormitory Authority for improperly substituting inferior materials, developers Frank and Kenneth Stubbolo were acquitted of fraud in 2004.

On a recent rainy afternoon at his office overlooking the campus, Butts acknowledged that the old Old Westbury was beset by problems.

"When I arrived ... we were on the front page of Newsday for about a solid week," he said. The school "needed some new life, a resuscitation...a resurrection."

Since then, Butts said he has defused the faculty's mistrust by giving professors a stronger hand in college governance; built five new dormitories and a new student union, even though "many of these projects were bogged down in corruption;" and added schools of education, business and arts and sciences. The school's open-admissions policy was dropped, raising standards of incoming students.

"I want to believe we brought a certain amount of integrity and honesty to this," he said. "We raised our standards."

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Political activism has a long history in the Abyssinian Baptist Church. The church was founded in 1808 when a group of African-Americans and Ethiopian merchants bolted from the First Baptist Church of New York City, where worshippers were segregated by race. In 1937, the Rev. Adam Clayton Powell Jr. succeeded his father in leading the congregation, while also serving on the City Council and later 14 terms in the House of Representatives. Butts became pastor in 1989.

Joseph P. Viteritti, Blanche D. Blank professor of public policy at Hunter College, calls Butts "a unique phenomenon in New York City."

Despite never running for office, Butts has molded a role for himself as a powerbroker. "He's been independent as a political actor," Viteritti said. "He has never been afraid to speak his mind. He has befriended people on both sides of the aisle. He can't be taken for granted."

Butts clashed with Rudolph Giuliani when he was mayor, calling him a "racist," but later reconciled in a public embrace at St. Patrick's Cathedral. He has strong ties to Gov. Pataki and New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, both Republicans, but heaps praise on the two Democratic candidates for governor, state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer and Nassau County Executive Tom Suozzi.

"I know Eliot Spitzer. He's a gentleman. I gave the invocation at a huge fundraiser kickoff he had. But somebody who has been tremendously supportive of my work is Tom Suozzi..."

If Butts remains coy about his gubernatorial preference, Viteritti said one thing is certain: The candidates will come calling to seek his blessing.

"Abyssinian is a landmark not only as a religious institution in the African-American community, but as a political institution," Viteritti said. "Nobody runs for anything important in New York without paying a visit."

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Though his main pulpit is in New York City, Butts, a Manhattan native, has preached at churches on Long Island and seen its racial, economic and social issues firsthand.

"I'm concerned that many young families can't live here because of the price of housing," he said. "I'm concerned there's a growing gang problem on the Island. I'm concerned that racial tensions have not improved to the degree many of us would want, not only on the Island, but across the country."

He compared the blight in Wyandanch to the rural South, "poor and undeveloped." The rift is not only between black and white on Long Island, but between Christian and Jew, Butts said.

"I happened to be part of a gathering one day. Somebody nudged me. I think I was the only black person in the room. He said, 'Look at the room. The Jewish people are on that side and [Christians on the other]. I said, 'Look at that!'"

Butts called the phenomenon "an unspoken problem" on Long Island, but "a real one." Asked what advice Martin Luther King Jr. might offer if he descended from heaven to have a cup of coffee, Butts said the slain leader would call for staking out the high moral ground and restoring some of the coalitions from the early days of the civil-rights movement.

"When you think about Martin King, you think about Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney," he said of the young civil rights workers slain in Philadelphia, Miss., in 1964. "When you think of Martin King, you think about Viola Liuzzo," a Detroit housewife killed while shuttling civil rights workers between Selma and Montgomery, Ala. "When you think about Martin Luther King, you think about Abraham Joshua Heschel," an influential rabbi who linked arms with King on his marches.

"People are human beings who share a common love of this country and community where we can all live in peace," Butts said.

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Might Butts himself run for office someday?

"It's never off the table, but right now my hands are full," he said. "When you start saying: 'Are you going to run for office?' my head starts hurting."

Among the things on his to-do list at Old Westbury are gradually increasing enrollment from the current 3,300 to 5,000 and winning accreditation for teacher education and master's in business administration programs.

Another is to bolster the school's "negligible" endowment.

"Everybody's applauding us," Butts said. "I need someone out there to say: 'This college is important to us. It's sitting on an important piece of land. The administration has cooperated with the surrounding community.'"

The initial gift would be the "first domino," he added. "Give us that first gift of \$1 million, then maybe someone else will come along. Then we can really start to rock and roll."#