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Reverend Cook Put On Paid Leave

By Lee Moriwaki

The Rev. Donovan Cook, long a voice in Seattle for social justice, has been placed on administrative leave as senior pastor of University Baptist Church following an allegation of professional misconduct.

Church leaders declined to give details of the allegation.

Cook, one of the country's earliest champions of sanctuary for Central American refugees, reportedly was in California with his family and could not be reached for comment.

In a letter to church members, Susan Greif, the church moderator - or lay leader of the congregation - said Cook "has been accused of serious professional misconduct, the latest action occurring over four years ago."

Greif said the church's executive committee, while "not the proper tribunal to determine the factual basis of these assertions," considered the matter "grave." She said the committee was investigating the matter thoroughly.

Greif said once the investigation is complete, the congregation would be told of the outcome and a series of meetings would be held in which church members could discuss the issue.

Yesterday, church officials said Greif was out of town. She could not be reached for comment.

Kirk Beach, the church's moderator-elect, would not discuss the nature of the allegation, who made it, or why it had been lodged now if the latest alleged incident was more than four years ago.

Greif, in her letter dated Aug. 27, said executive-committee members "have met with Donovan Cook and have presented him with a plan to begin a process of healing for the individuals involved, for Donovan and his family, and for everyone in the UBC community. Donovan has agreed to fully comply with the plan we have outlined."

Beach said Cook was on a paid leave. He did not say when Cook might return to work. Decisions in the case would be made by the congregation as a whole, said Beach.

"My sense is that something of this magnitude wouldn't be decided this week or this month," he said. A resolution might come early next month, he said.

"I have not spoken to a single person in our congregation who is not very grateful for Donovan and his leadership and who does not have as their fondest hope that he will be our minister for years to come," said Beach.

Greif pointed out that in the 20 years Cook has been minister of UBC, he has played an important part in the lives of many in the congregation and added: "His leadership has inspired us to take courageous stands on important issues. He has lifted us out of complacency and helped us to look beyond ourselves at the larger world."

Several church members said now was not the time to air Cook's leave because the congregation needed time to work through the situation.

Martha Baskin, who attends UBC, said word leaking out "totally reeks" and was divisive. She said Cook was "an easy target" of what could be a "smear campaign."

Greif asked in her letter that church members "please keep this matter privately within our congregation until it can be resolved."

Beach said no presumptions should be made because Cook took the leave. "The key is we have a procedure that we have to go through," he said.

Church members contacted by The Times said they did not have an idea what the allegation was about. But they voiced high regard for Cook as their pastor.

The Rev. Anne Hall, the church's second pastor, is filling in for Cook while he is on leave.

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