

# Pastor prepares to step into N.J. elected office

By John W. Coleman  
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*The Rev. Dale Caldwell greets a family on the campaign trail in Burlington, N.J. Caldwell, a United Methodist pastor, becomes New Jersey's lieutenant governor and secretary of state on Jan. 20. Photo courtesy of the Mikie Sherrill for Governor Campaign.*

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#### Key points:

- **The Rev. Dale Caldwell, a United Methodist, will be the first pastor and first former university president to serve as New Jersey's lieutenant governor.**
- **A longtime leader in public education, business development and community service, he hopes "to be a voice for all people and all communities in New Jersey" and said he looks forward to fostering interfaith relationships.**
- **Caldwell cites his family's generational history of public service as inspiration for his own. His father, the Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell, was a celebrated pastor and civil rights leader.**

When the Rev. Dale Caldwell, a United Methodist pastor, becomes New Jersey's lieutenant governor on Jan. 20, he will make history as the Garden State's first man in that role, while Governor-elect Mikie Sherrill becomes its second female governor.

Together the two Democrats won election last November and will take office after their inauguration ceremony in Newark, New Jersey.

Caldwell, 66, of New Brunswick, New Jersey, also will be the first pastor and first former university president to hold his new position, which was created in 2009. As the second highest ranking official in the state, the lieutenant governor serves as acting governor if the governor is unable to perform her duties. Caldwell also will serve as secretary of state, since the lieutenant governor is required to head a state department.

A licensed local pastor serving Covenant United Methodist Church in Plainfield, N.J., since 2021, Caldwell has been a trailblazer in many of his career and life pursuits — from higher education to the sport of tennis. He was the first African American president of United Methodist-affiliated Centenary University in Hackettstown, New Jersey, serving the nearly 160-year-old institution since 2023.

In addition to fortifying its financial footing, Caldwell led the university to advance the "social mobility" of disadvantaged students by providing more access to academic mentoring, financial aid and other opportunities. He stepped down in December to begin his new state government role. Retired United Methodist Bishop John R. Schol is now Centenary's

## president.

Caldwell, a tennis enthusiast, also is the first Black president and chief executive officer of the United States Tennis Association's Eastern Section. In that role since 2006, he created the Black Tennis Players Hall of Fame and spurred further recognition of African American tennis history and heroes, including those who suffered from historic racial discrimination.

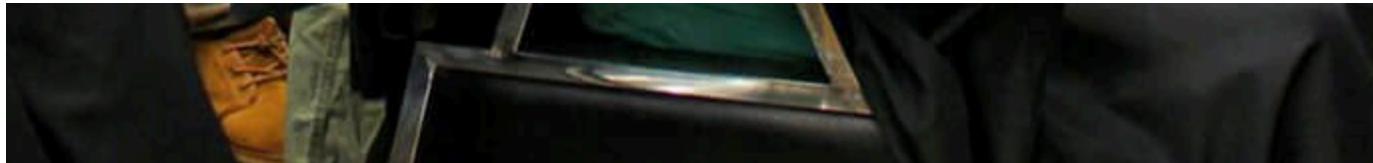
"I've loved being a college president and a pastor; so, I never expected to do this," Caldwell said about entering electoral politics. He has written about leading his church to move beyond just worship and do more collaborative, community outreach, an objective he recommends more churches pursue. "But as I look at my history, somehow it seems like God and the universe have called me to play a role here."



*The Rev. Dale Caldwell is the first man and pastor to serve as New Jersey's lieutenant governor. Photo courtesy of NJ.gov.*







*The Rev. Dale Caldwell visits a barbershop on the campaign trail in New Jersey. As the state's new lieutenant governor and secretary of state, Caldwell will oversee support for New Jersey's arts, history, tourism and business communities. Photo courtesy of the Mikie Sherrill for Governor Campaign.*

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Caldwell's history includes 11 years at Deloitte Consulting, advising the public sector on health care policies, after earning an MBA from the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School. He left to cofound and direct the Newark Alliance, which mobilizes cooperative economic development initiatives in New Jersey's largest city.

After earning a doctorate in education administration, Caldwell served as board president of New Jersey's Educational Services Commission for 23 years and as a member of the New Brunswick Board of Education for 25 years, including six years as its president. He also earned acclaim as an administrator and board president of two charter schools.

The lieutenant governor-elect's introduction to state government came when New Jersey Governor Jim McGreevey made him assistant commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs in 2003. He was later promoted to deputy commissioner and chief operating officer.

Governor-elect Sherrill chose Caldwell as her running mate last July because of his distinguished career and innovative leadership in business, education and community service, along with his religious experience and ability to connect with leaders of all faiths.

"Dale has spent his entire career bringing people together and delivering results for his community," Sherrill said. "His experience, integrity and deep commitment to empowering every New Jerseyan make him the ideal leader to steward our democratic institutions and promote the cultural and civic vitality of our state."



*The Rev. Dale Caldwell talks with an unidentified man on the campaign trail in New Jersey. Caldwell, a licensed local pastor, has served Covenant United Methodist Church in Plainfield, N.J., since 2021. As the state's lieutenant governor, he said he hopes to "develop a culture of caring and unity." Photo courtesy of the Mikie Sherrill for Governor Campaign.*

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### **A family history of public service**

Caldwell, who has published eight books, cites his family's history of public service as inspiration for his own. His father, the Rev. Gilbert H. Caldwell, was a celebrated pastor and civil rights leader who befriended and marched with the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.

The elder Caldwell, who died in 2020, was also a co-founder in 1968 of Black Methodists for Church Renewal, The United Methodist Church's Black membership caucus, and much later, a leader of the Church Within a Church justice movement that promotes racial, gender and sexual equality.

One of many things his son says he learned from him is “a love for talking with people whom I may disagree with but with whom I can reach some consensus.”

Caldwell’s parents met as college students in North Carolina, where his mother, Grace, became an educator and faithful ministry companion to his father. She died last year at age 90.

His daughter, Ashley M. Caldwell, 20, a public policy major at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, “admires her grandparents a great deal,” Caldwell said. But she is following in his footsteps. When he stepped down from the New Brunswick School Board in 2023 to focus on his university presidency, she was appointed to fill his seat, becoming the youngest member ever. She was then elected to the board in 2025.

Beyond his parents, Caldwell discovered, while exploring his family’s history, generations of ancestors who preceded him as leaders in religion, education and politics. That includes Bishop Morris Brown, who became the second bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1828, and U.S. Sen. Hiram Revels, also an AME pastor and educator, who became the first African American to serve in the U.S. Congress in 1870, during Reconstruction. Revels also was the first president of Alcorn State University, a historically Black institution in Mississippi.

After meeting and praying with religious leaders during the campaign, one task the future lieutenant governor looks forward to is fostering interfaith relationships with the state government.

“My dad was all about bringing people together with no judgment. And if I can bring that to the state, then I don’t care if you’re agnostic or atheist or Catholic or Hindu or Muslim, we’re all God’s children, and we should come together to serve the most vulnerable people among us.

“We live in a highly judgmental society, especially in politics,” he added. “And we have to get out of that for the good of the entire country. We need to develop a culture of caring and unity, and change our culture of division, so we can govern with more listening and compassion for others.”

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*Governor-elect Mikie Sherrill and the Rev. Dale Caldwell share a laugh on the campaign trail in New Jersey. Sherrill says she chose Caldwell as her running mate last July because of his innovative leadership, religious experience and ability to connect with leaders of all faiths. Photo courtesy of the Mikie Sherrill for Governor Campaign.*

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As secretary of state, Caldwell will oversee support for New Jersey's arts, history, tourism and business communities, as well as state elections, where he hopes to improve electoral security, transparency and the ability to challenge contested votes in court.

But Governor-elect Sherrill, a former U.S. Congresswoman, federal prosecutor and Navy helicopter pilot, said Caldwell also will work on improving entrepreneurship, while collaborating with "small actors" in the community, including small municipalities, businesses, churches, universities and nonprofits. That means "seeing people who have not often been seen," in his words.

The two became fast friends on the campaign trail last year, an experience he says he thoroughly enjoyed. She resonated with his passion for community service and with the Scripture that is key to his own life's work: [Proverbs 31:8-9](#): "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."

Caldwell said he and Sherrill "were totally aligned with this idea that we need to be a voice for all people and all communities in New Jersey."

As part of the campaign, Caldwell held dialogues at Black churches, Hispanic chambers of commerce and Asian American community centers. "We have a mandate from the Black, Latino and Asian communities," he said.

Sherrill's campaign surprised election pollsters by winning 56.7 percent of nearly 3.3 million votes, the largest total in New Jersey's history. "One of the realities about the election, looking behind the numbers," Caldwell reported, "was that we lost the white vote by 115,000 people. But the Black community voted 94% Democratic."

The campaign reportedly also won 68% of the Latino/Hispanic vote, 82% of the Asian American vote and 69% of "Other/Multiracial" voters, yielding it a victory margin of nearly a half million votes. Much of that margin was considered a reaction to President Donald Trump's "federal cuts to humanitarian aid and health programs, and policies perceived as hostile toward immigrants, the poor and people of color," according to the campaign's 2025 New Jersey Gubernatorial Election Analysis.

"So, as we govern," Caldwell explained, "we have to keep that in mind and make sure that we are responsive to all people in our policies, but especially to Black, Latino and Asian communities. Our mandate is for inclusive governance that's built on dialogue, transparency and respect for all."

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