

Barack Obama: Putting faith out front

How the Illinois senator came to embrace religion in his life.

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CHICAGO - On a recent Sunday, the magnetic pastor who led Barack Obama to Christianity was at his usual perch on the dais here, a South Side megachurch where a plaque beneath stained-glass depictions of the African-American struggle reads "Unashamedly Black, Unapologetically Christian."

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright Jr., in a casual short-sleeve shirt, preached about Martha as a "single saint," urging unmarried women to draw self-esteem from faith rather than men. He took blacks to task for what he said was their silence on domestic violence, homophobia, and the "illegal, untested, insane war in Iraq, started by a C-student draft dodger."

And in honor of National HIV Testing Day, he alerted his flock to mouth-swab tests being offered in the church building after services. "You can get results in 20 minutes – free and confidential," he said. Then he led more than a thousand worshipers, and a 200-member choir in traditional African dress, in a hymn to the Lord.

It was at Trinity United Church of Christ here, in the late 1980s, that Senator Obama says he found religion. Raised in a secular household, with ancestral roots running from Islam to Baptist to atheist, Obama had grown up a skeptic. But Mr. Wright's blend of scripture and social action resonated with Obama, then a young community organizer in black neighborhoods ravaged by steel-mill closings.

And when Wright preached one Sunday about the sustaining power of hope in the face of poverty and despair, Obama says he found himself in tears.

"The questions I had did not magically disappear," Obama wrote in his recent book, titled "The Audacity of Hope" after Wright's turn of phrase, of the day four years later when he made a formal commitment of Christian faith. "But kneeling beneath that cross on the South Side of Chicago, I felt God's spirit beckoning me. I submitted myself to His will, and dedicated myself to discovering His truth."

Attention to 'least of these'

More than the other Democratic candidates for president, Obama has made faith a centerpiece of his campaign.

He has warned the left against ceding the mantle of religion to the evangelical right. He speaks of the church as an abiding force in American public life, from the Boston Tea Party through the abolitionist and civil rights movements. He suffuses his speeches with biblical allusions – "I am my brother's keeper" is a favorite phrase. And he has cast his generation of black leaders as modern-day Joshuas, after Moses' successor, who led the Israelites to the Promised Land.

Many of Obama's political views are "an outgrowth of his reading of some of the seminal parts of the Bible about doing unto the 'least of these' just as we would have done unto Christ," says Joshua DuBois, the campaign's director of religious affairs, paraphrasing verses in the book of Matthew. "He takes very seriously the numerous passages in the Bible that talk not only about poverty, but of people of faith taking God's words and extending them beyond the four walls of the church."

But as Obama promotes faith as a means of uniting a diverse America around a shared set of values, he has at times found himself in a political minefield. To the left are liberals uneasy with religious intrusions into politics; to the right, conservatives who have questioned his Christianity and denounced his ties to Wright's Afrocentric church.

Secular childhood

Obama's childhood in Hawaii and Indonesia was a swirl of faiths and cultures. His father, a black Kenyan economist, was raised Muslim but was an atheist by the time Obama was born. His mother, a white Kansan, had Baptist and Methodist roots but viewed organized religion with a gimlet eye, wary of how often it cloaked intolerance.

"Jesus, she felt, was a wonderful example," Obama's half-sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng, recalled in a phone interview. "But

she felt that a lot of Christians behaved in un-Christian ways."

In their house, the Bible, the Koran, and the Bhagavad-Gita shared shelf space with books on mythology. His mother viewed them all through the eyes of the anthropologist she was. Religion for her was "just one of the many ways – and not necessarily the best way – that man attempted to control the unknowable and understand the deeper truths about our lives," Obama wrote in "The Audacity of Hope," published in 2006.

After his mother was remarried, to an Indonesian Muslim, and the family moved to Indonesia, Obama went first to a Catholic academy and then a public Muslim school open to students of all beliefs.

But he was largely indifferent toward religion until he moved to Chicago in 1985 for a job organizing impoverished South Side residents in campaigns for better jobs, schools, and housing. As the recent college graduate went from church to church to enlist clergy in his causes, he heard an oft-repeated refrain: What church do you belong to?

"He really came here with a very strong passion about how can we change things, and he understood the churches as being a vehicle for doing that," recalls the Rev. Michael Pflieger, pastor of the Saint Sabina Church, a Catholic church on the South Side, who has known Obama since his

early days in Chicago. But he also "realized that with some churches there would be a credibility issue if he were organizing churches but didn't have a home church."

'Against "middleclassness" '

Trinity United Church of Christ occupies a tan brick building on West 95th Street across railroad tracks from a public housing project. Since becoming pastor in 1972, Wright grew its membership from a few dozen to more than 8,500. He wore African dashikis, planted a "Free South Africa" sign on the church lawn, and demanded tolerance of gays and lesbians, a maverick stance for a black church.

The church sprouted more than 70 ministries, from AIDS counseling and African cultural exchange to a "manhood" program providing father figures to children of single mothers. Oprah Winfrey and the singer Mavis Staples have worshiped there, as have people on welfare.

While other black megachurch leaders like Creflo Dollar and T.D. Jakes were preaching prosperity gospel, the idea that God rewards the faithful with financial success, Wright asked worshipers to endorse a "Black Value System." One of its precepts is a disavowal of "middleclassness," a selfish pursuit of money and status without giving back to the larger black community.

Wright also preached black liberation theology, an outgrowth of the civil rights era that sees the Bible, particularly the exodus from Egyptian slavery, as a parable of the struggle for black freedom.

However incongruously, Trinity became the largest congregation in The United Church of Christ, a predominantly white denomination known for its liberal politics and steepled churches in small New England towns. The UCC, or Congregational church, as it is also called, was the first mainline Protestant church to ordain an African-American (1785), a woman (1853), and an openly gay man (1972), and the first major Christian denomination to endorse same-sex marriage (2005).

Wright impressed Obama, and by 1988 the younger man found himself in the pews, listening to parishioners clap and cry out as Wright spoke of "the audacity of hope" in times of suffering, Obama writes in his bestselling 1995 memoir, "Dreams from My Father." In Wright's words that day, Obama glimpsed the deeper meaning he had been searching for in his work with the South Side's poor, who often had little to go on but faith.

"In that single note – hope! – I heard something else," Obama wrote. "At the foot of that cross, inside the thousands of churches across the city, I imagined the stories of ordinary black people merging with the stories of David and Goliath, Moses and Pharaoh, the Christians in the lion's

den, Ezekiel's field of dry bones. Those stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story."

Four years later, after returning to Chicago from Harvard Law School, Obama joined Trinity and walked down the aisle in a formal commitment of faith. Wright later married Obama and his wife, Michelle, and blessed the births of their two children.

By his own admission, Obama's conversion was "a choice and not an epiphany." It owed as much to spiritual yearning as to a recognition of the power of the black church to change lives and society.

"What moved me was the role all the congregations I worked with played in the life of the people I was working with," Obama said in an e-mail to the Monitor. "What touched me was how faith bolstered them against heartache and disappointment and kept them going."

Fancy footwork

After law school, Obama returned to Chicago to register low-income voters for the 1992 presidential election. He worked as a civil rights lawyer and as a lecturer at University of Chicago Law School before his election to the Illinois state Senate in 1996.

From the moment he took the national stage, at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, Obama, then running for US Senate, made no secret of his spiritual bent. "We worship an awesome God in the blue states," he said in a keynote address credited with launching his stardom.

But for a liberal Democrat and former constitutional law instructor, the plea for a broader public role for religion has at times required some fancy footwork.

He has called for both "a politics of conscience" based on ecumenical religious values and a clear line between church and state. He has both invoked God in his denunciations of the Iraq war and criticized President Bush for using religious terms like "good" and "evil" to justify it.

"The danger of using good versus evil in the context of war is it may lead us to be not as critical as we should be about our own actions," he said at a candidates' forum on religion last month, calling the torture of prisoners at Abu Ghraib and the treatment of suspected terrorists at the Guantánamo Bay prison camp "unjust."

Obama and his advisers have said that his faith has motivated legislation meant to benefit the poor, the uninsured, and minorities. In the Illinois state Senate, Father Pfleger recalls, Obama sponsored measures to clamp down on high-interest "payday loans" in poor neighborhoods and to require Illinois police agencies to record the race of

motorists they stop as part of a state effort to monitor racial profiling. He also pressed for a bill requiring police to videotape interrogations of murder suspects, as a safeguard against coerced confessions.

At a speech last month at the annual Hampton University Ministers' Conference in Virginia, he offered his most detailed list to date of programs he said should spring from "our faith, the Word, and His will." They range from a new service corps for disadvantaged youths and a program to have nurses teach low-income mothers good parenting to more jobs programs for ex-convicts and more venture capital for minority-owned businesses.

Elsewhere, he has preached a version of his church's critique of black "middleclassness." He told a crowd in Selma, Ala., in March that his generation of blacks should strive for more than just "some of that Oprah money."

"Materialism alone will not fulfill the possibilities of your existence," he said. "You have to fill it with the golden rule. You've got to fill it with thinking about others."

Last year, he and Sen. Orrin Hatch, a Utah Republican, sponsored a successful bill to let people in bankruptcy continue to donate money to their places of worship.

Obama's advisers say his open faith and personal narrative are political assets as churchgoers grow increasingly

disillusioned with Mr. Bush. "The ultimate swing voters right now are moderate Catholic voters and moderate evangelical voters," says Shaun Casey, professor of Christian ethics at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington and an Obama campaign adviser. "There are more opportunities for Democrats with them than there have been in about 20 years."

In addition to Mr. DuBois, the campaign has faith-outreach workers on staff in Iowa, New Hampshire, and South Carolina. It holds conference calls every week with religious leaders in the early primary states. And it has staged a half dozen "faith forums" in New Hampshire, where voters, local clergy, and campaign staff trade views on the proper role of faith in public life.

A Time magazine poll released Thursday found that more voters see Obama as a strongly religious person than they do every major presidential hopeful but Mitt Romney, the Republican former governor of Massachusetts whose Mormonism has drawn extensive news coverage.

But whether that public perception translates into votes, even among the 1.2 million members of Obama's own denomination, has yet to be seen.

At the annual gathering for Iowa clergy of the United Church of Christ, which Obama addressed last month, the

finance chair of a church outside Des Moines said he had thought Obama was Muslim.

Another church leader, pastor Al Hohl of the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Sioux City, Iowa, said he hadn't heard such candid talk of faith from a liberal since his days as a seminary student in the 1960s. He found it refreshing, but plans to vote for Bill Richardson, the New Mexico governor and Democratic presidential candidate, whom he views as more politically experienced.

But others there said Obama gave voice to deeply held yet seldom expressed convictions about a progressive role for organized religion. "It's time we stand up to the conservatives," said Barbara Brandt, a parish administrator at a UCC church in Reinbeck, Iowa. "We're as Christian as they are."

Pastor disinvented

Obama's mingling of faith and politics has drawn fire from some on both the left and the right.

"A war of Bible-quoting isn't supposed to be going on during a campaign season," says Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "Proof-testing the Bible to see if God is a liberal or a conservative or a uniter or a divider is not relevant."

Some evangelical leaders have questioned how Obama can square his Christianity with support for abortion rights and same-sex civil unions. And conservatives have pummeled Wright for his Afrocentric beliefs, his equation of Zionism with racism, and his remarks on the 9/11 attacks. ("In the 21st century, white America got a wake-up call after 9/11/01," Wright wrote in 2005 in a church-affiliated magazine. "White America and the Western world came to realize that people of color had not gone away, faded into the woodwork or just 'disappeared' as the Great White West kept on its merry way of ignoring Black concerns.")

The night before he announced his candidacy for president in February, Obama withdrew an invitation to Wright to give the public invocation, a decision that did not sit well with some other Chicago pastors. Pfleger said Obama told him that he didn't want criticism of Wright to detract from the big day. "I told him I thought it was the wrong decision," Pfleger said in an interview.

Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for the campaign, said "the change was made in order to avoid having statements and beliefs being used out of context and forcing the entire church to defend itself."

Wright remains Obama's pastor and friend, she said, but they do not see eye to eye on every issue. Obama, she said, "strongly disagrees with any portrayal of the Israeli-

Palestinian conflict that advocates divestment from Israel or expresses anything less than strong support for Israel's security."

As for the church's Black Value System, she said, Obama "believes its basic tenets of commitment to God, to community, to self-discipline and self-reliance continue to have applicability not only to the African-American community but to all people."

Though Obama was an early and fervent critic of the war in Iraq, he has steered clear of his pastor's sometimes inflammatory rhetoric. At a candidates' forum on faith last month, Obama framed his opposition in more nuanced terms.

"I always remember Abraham Lincoln when, during the Civil War, he said, 'We shouldn't be asking whose side God is on, but whether we're on His side,'" he said. "And I think that's the question that all of us have to ask ourselves.... Are we advancing the causes of justice and freedom? Are we our brother's keeper, our sister's keeper? And that's how I measure whether what we're doing is right."

Wright declined in an e-mail interview to answer questions about some of his contentious remarks. "I have given up trying to respond to conservatives who have done no study of liberation theology, black theology, or African-American history," he wrote.

Obama's message of faith and his ties to a controversial pastor have not been without pitfalls, analysts say.

But "the positives outweigh the negatives," says Professor Dwight Hopkins of the University of Chicago Divinity School, who is a member of Trinity but not affiliated with the Obama campaign. "I think he is one of the biggest threats to the Republican Party and their campaign, because he has seized the religious discursive ground. No Democratic candidate since Jimmy Carter has been able to do that."