

The Obamas Find a Church Home — Away from Home

By AMY SULLIVAN Monday, Jun. 29, 2009

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From left: Dennis Brack / epa / Corbis; Brooks Kraft / Corbis for TIME

For the past five months, White House aides and friends of the Obamas have been quietly visiting local churches and vetting the sermons of prospective first ministers in a search for a new — and uncontroversial — church home. Obama has even sampled a few himself, attending services at 19th Street Baptist on the weekend before his Inauguration and celebrating Easter at St. John's Episcopal Church.

Now, in an unexpected move, Obama has told White House aides that instead of joining a congregation in Washington, he will follow in George W. Bush's footsteps and make his primary place of worship Evergreen Chapel, the nondenominational church at Camp David.

A number of factors drove the decision — financial, political, personal — but chief among them was the desire to worship without being on display. Obama was reportedly taken aback by the circus stirred up by his visit to 19th Street Baptist in January. Lines started forming three hours before the morning service, and many longtime members were literally left out in the cold as the church filled with outsiders eager to see the new President. Even at St. John's, which is so accustomed to presidential visitors that it is known as the "Church of the Presidents," worshippers couldn't help themselves from snapping photos of Obama on their camera phones as they walked down the aisle past him to take Communion.

The challenge of being part of a church community but also praying in peace has long been a problem for Presidents, according to historian Carl Sferrazza Anthony. "McKinley hated having people staring at him while he read Psalms, sang hymns, put money in the collection plate or took communion," he writes in *America's First Families*. "By the 1920s, getting a presidential family in and out of church was a production. Secret Service agents had to cordon off a clear path from the curb to the church entrance before the Coolidges arrived ... [and] they were swiftly escorted to their third-row pew."

Even when a President selects a church for personal reasons, the decision is politically freighted. So many congregations have lobbied the White House to become the chosen one that Obama inevitably risked offending some powerful local pastors by picking one church over the rest. Of course, not picking any of them will make significant waves as well. The official White House response to this story is that "the President and First Family continue to look for a church home. They have enjoyed worshipping at Camp David and several other congregations over the months, and will choose a church at the time that is best for their family."

The Clintons attended Foundry United Methodist Church on 16th Street and were particularly active during the years before Chelsea left for college. But White House aides say that security measures required by the Secret Service have become stricter since 9/11 and would cause significant delays for parishioners — and at significant cost to taxpayers — on Sunday mornings. Given Obama's popularity within the African-American community, the President also worried that if he chose a local black congregation, church members would find themselves competing with sightseers for space in the pews.

The First Family won't have that problem at Camp David, where the 150-seat Evergreen Chapel attracts a congregation of between 50 and 70 people most Sundays. The rustic stone-and-glass octagonal structure was built nearly two decades ago with private funds; President George H.W. Bush dedicated it in 1991. At the ceremony, Christian singer Sandi Patti sang, and the late Cardinal James Hickey of Washington delivered a sermon calling the chapel a "witness to our common belief that we need to seek divine guidance in the conduct of our national affairs."

Each week, regardless of whether the President is onsite, Evergreen Chapel holds nondenominational Christian services open to the nearly 400 military personnel and staff at Camp David, as well as their families. A music director from nearby Hood College coordinates adult and children's choirs (Clinton sang occasionally with the choir when he visited). In December, the

kids in the congregation put on a Christmas pageant, and the chapel holds a candlelight service on Christmas Eve. The Bush family enjoyed Christmas at Evergreen Chapel so much that they celebrated the holiday there for all eight years of Bush's Administration.

Camp David's current chaplain, Lieutenant Carey Cash, leads the services at Evergreen. If the White House had custom-ordered a pastor to be the polar opposite of Jeremiah Wright, they could not have come as close as Cash. (As it is, the White House had no hand in selecting Cash. The Navy rotates chaplains through Camp David every three years; Cash began his tour this past January.) The 38-year-old Memphis native is a graduate of the Citadel and the great-nephew of Johnny Cash. He served a tour as chaplain with a Marine battalion in Iraq and baptized nearly 60 Marines during that time. Cash earned his theology degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas — and, yes, that means Obama's new pastor is a Southern Baptist.

Cash and his wife also have five children, some of whom may find themselves acting opposite Sasha and Malia in the Christmas pageant. But if the experience of past Camp David chaplains is any guide, Cash won't necessarily have the opportunity to form a pastoral relationship with Obama. "We used to tell people our job was to run like a five-star resort," said Patrick McLaughlin, who was chaplain at Camp David from 2002 to 2005, in an interview with Religion News Service. "One of the things you value when you go on vacation is peace and quiet." His contact with Bush outside worship services, McLaughlin said, was "very little."

That means Obama is still looking for someone he can pray with and turn to for spiritual guidance. George W. Bush and Bill Clinton stayed in close touch with their hometown pastors after moving to the White House. Not long into his first term, Clinton also started scheduling regular meetings with Bill Hybels, pastor of a Chicago-area evangelical megachurch called Willow Creek. Three other religious leaders — Phil Wogaman, Tony Campolo and Gordon MacDonald — came to the White House for monthly prayer sessions with Clinton after the Lewinsky scandal, as impeachment began to weigh on him.

But Barack Obama found himself spiritually isolated upon entering the Oval Office. He famously broke ties last year with Jeremiah Wright, his former pastor, and resigned his membership at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. So, just as he followed Bush's lead in choosing

Evergreen as a church home, the President is taking a page from Clinton's playbook on this front: Obama has a small group of pastors he contacts for prayer and spiritual support (including two men who played the same role at times for Bush).

Those two, Kirbyjon Caldwell and T.D. Jakes, are both African-American ministers from Texas. Caldwell offered a prayer at Bush's first Inauguration and in 2008 he officiated at Jenna Bush's wedding. By that point, he was an Obama supporter, even launching the website JamesDobsonDoesntSpeakForMe.com last summer when the Focus on the Family leader accused Obama of "deliberately distorting the traditional understanding of the Bible to fit his own worldview." Obama chose Jakes to preach the sermon at a private prayer service the morning of his Inauguration and reached out to him to pray by phone on other occasions.

While the other three leaders Obama turns to are all members of his Faith Advisory Council, when he contacts them, it is to talk not on a policy level but a personal one. Otis Moss Jr. is a retired Baptist pastor who once served with Martin Luther King Sr. at Ebenezer Church. His son is the new pastor — following Jeremiah Wright — at Trinity in Chicago, but Moss is the model of a proper old-school preacher and is the father figure of Obama's group. His fellow council member, Joel Hunter, is a white Evangelical and pastor of a Florida mega church. And Vashti McKenzie is the first woman elected as a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

McKenzie isn't surprised that Obama has reached out for prayer and guidance. "This President has not shown himself to be a person in isolation — going out on dates, spending time in the community," she says. "You wouldn't expect him to isolate himself spiritually. This is a man with a faith center; we've heard him give his testimony." Her advice for how to build a life of faith within the White House? "Everybody needs to just back off and settle down. Let him choose where he's comfortable, choose where he and his family are going to be spiritually fed, and then let it be his choice." Amen.

—*With reporting by Elizabeth Dias*