

## Barack Obama facing criticism for his "dial-a-pastor" advice line

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Barack Obama is under fire after replacing his estranged pastor Jeremiah Wright with a new circle of religious confidantes whose views are dramatically at odds with some of his political goals.

By Tim Shipman in Washington

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8: The Rev Wright show Photo: AP

The president is now taking spiritual guidance from no less than five different pastors, whom he phones for advice at moments of stress or when making big decisions.

But a year after the incendiary rantings of Rev Wright threatened to derail Mr Obama's presidential campaign, revelation of the "dial-a-prayer" sessions has prompted critics to declare that he has a new "pastor problem".

Four of the president's inner circle of religious counsellors have drawn the ire of gay rights groups since they are opposed to equal rights for homosexuals and in some cases believe that they can be cured of their "sin" through prayer.

Others are concerned that the five preachers, ostensibly selected because they share Mr Obama's view that the church should help tackle poverty at the grassroots level, include two Texas megachurch pastors who preach that personal wealth is a sign of Godliness.

The prayer circle is overwhelmingly opposed to abortion, a position at odds with Mr Obama's "anything goes" pro-choice stance, arguably the most liberal of any president in US history.

Mr Obama has handed huge influence to Bishop T.D. Jakes, Kirbyjon Caldwell, Joel Hunter, Jim Wallis and civil rights veteran Otis Moss Jr, in part, because he and wife Michelle have failed to settle on a new church in Washington to replace the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago which they abandoned last year.

White House sources say that the family have not yet found a congregation that meets their theological requirements and is big enough to cope with the disruption of frequent presidential visits and the likely swell in congregation that would accompany the Obamas' patronage. It will also have to be secured by the Secret Service.

Mr Obama prayed with Otis Moss and Joel Hunter on the eve of his election and would have added Revs Jakes and Caldwell to the conference call if they had been available.

The most controversial figure the president has been telephoning is Bishop T. D. Jakes, head of the 30,000 strong Potter's House parish in Dallas, who refers to homosexuality as "brokenness" and recently claimed that he wouldn't hire a sexually active gay person.

When Rev Jakes' son Jermaine was arrested last month for soliciting gay sex in a Dallas park after exposing himself to two undercover male vice squad detectives, the bishop said he revealed he had issued "correction" to his son.

Bishop Jakes has also been criticised for his advocacy of "prosperity theology", which teaches that God rewards the faithful with material gifts. In one sermon, "Provision for the Vision," he bragged about his own stable of luxury cars.

Similar claims are levelled at Kirbyjon Caldwell, who runs the world's largest United Methodist congregation at Windsor Village Church in Houston, who has been criticised for going "too far in linking spiritual wholeness to financial wholeness".

His church prohibits ordination for practicing homosexuals, same-sex unions and a woman on staff at Rev Caldwell's church runs a group called Metanoia, a gay conversion programme which claims to use Christian teaching to "cure" those "seeking freedom from homosexuality, lesbianism, prostitution, sex addiction and other habitual sins".

That has enraged Obama supporter Wayne Besen, founder of Truth Wins Out, a New York organisation which campaigns against the "ex-gay" movement in the church, which insists that homosexuality is nothing more than a sinful lifestyle choice.

He told *The Sunday Telegraph*: "I think Obama's got another pastor problem. There's a tendency to surround himself with these anti-gay preachers which is very offensive. These are people who believe that we are sinful and sick and that you can pray away the gay."

"The notion that Obama can't find a pastor in America who doesn't have these outrageous extreme beliefs is baffling to many of us."

Campaigners say that by talking to those with the views of Bishop Jakes, the president sends the wrong message to his gay supporters who had hoped for a new tone from the White House after eight years in which George W. Bush used wedge issues like opposition to gay marriage to drum up conservative votes.

Mr Besen said: "He's giving credibility to people who are virulently anti-gay and promoting discrimination. The president has given these homophobes his stamp of approval. He has given them a platform. By elevating these extreme elements, he's hurting our community." He suggested that Mr Obama should consult Bishop Gene Robinson, the openly gay head of the American episcopal church, whose ordination sparked a split in the worldwide Anglican union.

"Why not have Gene Robinson in that five?" he said. "There's a person of courage and integrity and the kind of international leader that Obama should look towards. It's very disappointing." Campaigners also have a problem with Joel Hunter, the pastor of a conservative megachurch in Florida, who was once the head of the Christian Coalition, a nationwide hardline anti-gay and anti-abortion group.

He provided the closing benediction to the Democratic National Convention in 2008 and offered a blessing over President-Elect Obama during a, pre-inauguration service held at St. John's Episcopal Church opposite the White House, a service also addressed by T.D. Jakes.

The fourth member of Mr Obama's spiritual team, Jim Wallis, president and chief executive of Sojourners, a liberal evangelical magazine based in Washington has made friendly overtures to gay Christians but he is a vocal opponent of abortion and gay marriage.

The only member of the new religious circle the campaigners don't have a problem with is Rev Otis Moss Jr, an old associate of Rev Martin Luther King.

Bishop Jakes told the *New York Times* Mr Obama contacted him for several prayer phone calls, most recently when his grandmother died two days before November's election. "You take turns praying," he said. "It's really more about contacting God than each other." In a move that has provoked anxiety among some of his supporters, Mr Obama has handed three of his confidantes real political power, appointing Mr Wallis, Rev Hunter and Rev Moss to his President's Council on Faith-based and Neighbourhood Partnerships to deliver public funds to church social groups.

Conservative religious commentator Joseph Loconte voiced the fears of those on the right that Mr Obama is seeking cover from conservative theologians to enact liberal policies, that in effect he will neuter them. "The temptation to manipulate faith for partisan ends is likely to prove irresistible," he wrote.

But for those who want Mr Obama to pass key gay rights legislation, including overturning the "don't ask, don't tell" rules banning gays in the military, the fear is that the pastors will neuter Mr Obama's social policies.

Jason Bartlett of the National Black Justice Coalition, a gay rights group, said: "We respect the president's right to seek counsel and guidance from anyone that he chooses," he said. "Where we might begin to object is when those people come into the public domain, like at the inauguration, or speaking at the White House, or having even an unofficial position in the administration if they had undue influence."