

Obama's Path to Faith Was Eclectic

President-Elect Will Reach Out to Diverse Set of Religious Leaders for Advice

By Eli Saslow

Washington Post Staff Writer

Sunday, January 18, 2009; A18

The presidential inauguration ceremony on Tuesday will begin and end with prayers from two men whom Barack Obama considers role models, advisers and dear friends. One, Joseph Lowery, is an 87-year-old black liberal Methodist from the Deep South who spent his career fighting for civil rights. The other, Rick Warren, is a 54-year-old white conservative evangelical from Southern California who fights same-sex unions.

The two religious icons are, Lowery said, "usually on opposite sides of the chart." But Obama will step onstage with them, set his hand on a Bible and feel comfortable in the vast space in between.

For the president-elect, religion has always been less about theology than the power God inspires in communities that worship Him, friends and advisers said. It has been more than three months since he sat through a Sunday church service and at least five years since he attended regularly, but during the transition, Obama has spoken to religious leaders almost daily. They said Obama calls to seek advice, but rarely is it spiritual. Instead, he asks how to mobilize faith-based communities behind his administration.

Obama grew up the son of an atheist, spent two formative years in a predominantly Muslim school, worked out of an office in a Catholic rectory, accepted Jesus at a traditionally black church and married the cousin of a Chicago area rabbi. His personal journey to faith is a modern amalgamation that friends expect to be reflected not just at his inauguration but in his governing: Obama will reach out to a diverse set of leaders and try to join them in unconventional ways, unconcerned about their theological and political differences.

It's a risky tactic, considering that religion resulted in a litany of problems for Obama during his campaign. He stopped attending Chicago's Trinity United Church of Christ after the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. made a series of bombastic remarks. Some Christians mistook him for Muslim. Some Catholic leaders expressed support for his Republican opponent, John McCain. Evangelical celebrity psychologist James C. Dobson accused Obama of "deliberately distorting" the Bible.

Now, as Obama prepares for the presidency, he has called on dozens of religious leaders to transcend their doctrinal or sectarian differences and focus instead on their common morality. It's that belief in universal truths that is the basis of Obama's faith, advisers said. He has devoted himself to what he considers God's truth and thereby internalized the golden rule.

"In terms of religious outreach, it will be as inclusive as anything you've ever seen," said Shaun Casey, who teaches religion and politics at Wesley Theological Seminary in the District and advised Obama during his campaign. "He's going to involve some different groups, like during the inauguration, that might come as a shock to people."

Many presidents have entered office with vague promises of broad inclusion, but Obama's early actions suggest that he intends to follow through. V. Gene Robinson, the Episcopal Church's first openly gay bishop, will deliver the invocation at an inaugural event today. On Wednesday, Protestant Rev. Sharon E. Watkins will become the first woman to deliver the sermon at the National Prayer Service, which traditionally concludes the inaugural festivities.

Obama has helped facilitate brainstorming groups that include rabbis, pastors and politicians. Ten hours before the polls closed on Election Day, he prayed via telephone with Joel Hunter, an evangelical pastor from Florida who voted for Mike Huckabee in the Republican primary.

"The president-elect has a keen appreciation for the power of faith-based organizations that you don't see in many politicians, so he's reaching out," said Hunter, who preaches to a congregation of more than 10,000 each week. "I said something to him once about how evangelicals really need to walk out their faith to other people. And he said, 'Boy, that's where I am, too.'"

Said Martin Marty, a religious historian from Chicago: "What he's trying to do, rather daringly, is enact the plurality that he embodies. This is not unusual for a new president. There's a tendency to want to please everybody, but by doing that you run the risk of pleasing nobody."

Obama was born to parents who distrusted organized religion: a father who transitioned from Muslim to atheist as he became increasingly disillusioned with his place in the world; a mother who found solace in spirituality and good deeds but never showed interest in her family's Christian roots. Obama has said he accompanied his mother to church occasionally on holidays as a child but rarely contemplated religion until he left Hawaii for college.

As an undergraduate student at [Columbia University](#), Obama read some basic theological texts and felt drawn to Sunday morning services at predominantly black churches in Harlem. When he interviewed in 1985 for a community-organizing position on the South Side of Chicago that required working with churches, it was religion that persuaded him to take the job.

"That was the one aspect that he was really drawn to and wanted to be a part of," said Jerry Kellman, who hired Obama for a salary of less than \$10,000.

Obama took the job and moved into an office at Holy Rosary, a small Catholic church in Chicago's Roseland neighborhood where he mingled with a diverse congregation that included equal parts whites, blacks and second-generation Mexican immigrants. He spent 10-hour days at the church, absorbing its motto: "living in faith together."

Kellman took Obama to services on the South Side every Sunday to introduce him to community leaders, choosing their destinations based on which churches had the most neighborhood influence. Mega-churches, tiny congregations, Protestants, Methodists, Lutherans, Episcopalians -- Obama worshiped with them all.

In his free moments, he sat in his office and wrote short stories about worship and church life. Other times, he smoked cigarettes with Bill Stenzel, the priest at Holy Rosary, and talked to him about faith.

"I would describe him as somebody who was intensely curious," Stenzel said. "He was seeking something. At first, coming into the church, he felt like he was stepping on foreign territory, and it gradually became his territory."

Obama could talk capably about some religious theory -- he studied the Rev. [Martin Luther King Jr.'s](#) faith, Catholic novelist Graham Greene and Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. He never spoke in terms of experiencing an awakening, Kellman said. But what Obama lacked in spiritual nuance he compensated for in his reverence for the church's import in history. On Sundays in Chicago, he preferred to visit churches with services rich in emotion and interactivity, Kellman said.

"It was a very formative period for him," he added. "His sense of church and his sense of God became very much a community experience. It's how people survive, how people make it through difficult times. The churches we dealt with were extended families. They were a way of providing a vision of a better world. It was a broad sense of religion, and it fit. It fit for him very quickly."

A few years later, Obama returned to Chicago from [Harvard Law School](#) to be baptized at Trinity United Church of Christ, with a predominantly black congregation on the South Side led by Wright. Obama had come to realize, he wrote in his 2006 book, "The Audacity of Hope," that the church "had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life." He described his baptism not as an epiphany but as a conscious choice.

Obama and his wife, Michelle, went to Trinity often after they married and sometimes stayed to eat lunch with other parishioners. Their attendance waned after their first daughter, Malia, was born in 1998, and Michelle remarked to friends that she couldn't imagine going to church every week. Obama, always the seeker, sometimes read the Bible for evening relaxation or listened to audiotapes on religious theory on his long drives down to the [Illinois Senate](#) in Springfield, friends said.

Just as he had used religion to galvanize residents of the South Side as a community organizer, Obama used it to identify with constituents as a politician. When he was starting his career in the state Senate in the late 1990s, Obama joined a 33-person brainstorming group called the Saguaro Seminar, a collection of activists, academics and politicians who gathered every few months and ruminated on politics and religion.

Through the Saguaro Seminar, Obama befriended the president of the [Christian Coalition](#) and Kirbyjon Caldwell, a Dallas area Methodist minister who became [President Bush's](#) closest spiritual adviser. Obama grew particularly close to [Jim Wallis](#), an evangelical political activist from Washington who founded [Sojourners](#) magazine.

"We hit it off," Wallis said. "We had very similar ideas about how faith could contribute to public life. He wanted that to be a major part of his career going forward."

If at first it seemed unusual for a liberal Democrat to spend so much time talking about God, Obama's closest followers gradually came to expect it. He delivered a speech at Warren's Saddleback Church in 2006 despite protests from fellow Democrats. He wrote a chapter about faith for "The Audacity of Hope" and met with groups of 30 to 40 religious leaders more than a dozen times during his presidential campaign.

"Secularists are wrong when they ask believers to leave their religion at the door before entering into the public square," Obama said during a speech at the Call to Renewal conference in 2006. "Indeed, the majority of great reformers in American history were not only motivated by faith, but repeatedly used religious language to argue their cause."

Obama has told friends that he expects he and his family to return to a more regular form of worship once they settle into Washington. The Obamas say they have not started looking for a church yet, and the president-elect has repeatedly expressed concern about his presence disrupting a local congregation. But friends and religious advisers said the Obamas probably will try a few churches and end up joining a historically black congregation in the next several months.

Even if Obama attends only occasionally, advisers said, he wants to join to connect himself to his new home town, just as he did in Chicago.

"He instinctively realizes that it's an important thing to do," said Caldwell, the Bush adviser who supported and advised Obama during the campaign. "I'm not saying he's somebody who will go every Sunday and stand up to talk about his personal faith. That's not him. But I do believe he understands that being a part of that faith community is something that's extremely important going forward."

http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/17/AR2009011702601_pf.html