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Congregation Defends Obama's Ex-Pastor

Criticism Seen as Attempt to Silence Voice of Black Church

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CHICAGO -- The Rev. Jeremiah Wright spent 36 years teaching this congregation how to recognize injustice, and his parishioners sense it all around them now. On Sunday, more than 3,000 of them filled Trinity United Church of Christ on the city's South Side to pray for their former pastor. They read a handout that described Wright's newfound infamy as a "modern-day lynching." They scrawled his name in tribute on the inside of their service programs and applauded as Wright's protege, the Rev. Otis Moss III, stepped to the pulpit.

"No matter what they want," Moss said, "we will not shut up."

A simmering controversy over Wright's provocative rhetoric and his connection to Sen. Barack Obama ignited last week after some of his old sermons were aired, prompting the Democratic presidential candidate to condemn them and severing Wright's connection to the campaign. But inside this mega-church that Wright built up from financial ruin, his most loyal listeners offered a different interpretation: It is Wright, and black theology in its entirety, that is misunderstood.

To his supporters, the message Wright wove through more than 4,000 sermons is now disseminated in a handful of grainy, two-minute video clips that tell only part of his story. Yes, they acknowledge, he was sometimes overcome at the pulpit by a righteous rage about racism and social injustice. But he was a radical who also inspired women to preach, gays to marry and predominantly white youth groups to visit his services. Until he retired last month, Wright, 66, implored all comers at Trinity to "get happy" -- to shout, to sing, to dance in the aisles while he preached the gospel.

"The world is only seeing this tiny piece of him," Moss said. "Right now, we are all being vilified. This isn't just about Trinity, isn't just about [Wright]. This is an attack on the African American church tradition, and that's the way we see it. This is an attempt to silence our voice."

More than a year ago, Wright warned Obama and Moss that a presidential campaign made criticism of Trinity inevitable, but none of them anticipated fallout like this. Web sites and television news shows recalled Wright's praise of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan and played a greatest-hits compilation of Wright's most incendiary comments: that Sept. 11, 2001, meant "America's chickens are coming home to roost." That former president Bill Clinton "did the same thing to us that he did to Monica Lewinsky." That "racism is how this country was founded and how this country is still run."

Flooded with a tide of criticism, Trinity declines to condemn Wright's remarks, instead casting them as consistent with the traditions of the black church. He practices a "black liberation theology" that encourages a preacher to speak forcefully against the institutions of oppression, and occasional hyperbole is an occupational hazard, ministers said. "There's so much passion in what we do that it can overflow," said the Rev. Frederick D. Haynes III, senior pastor at Friendship-West Baptist Church in Dallas.

Wright left for Africa with his family last week and declined to comment. In his absence, Obama distanced himself from the man he once called his "spiritual mentor," who married him and his wife, baptized their two daughters and blessed their Chicago house. Obama said he had never been in attendance for Wright's most controversial statements, and he called his comments "inflammatory and appalling."

On Monday, Obama reiterated his criticism of Wright and scheduled a major speech about race. He said that on Tuesday in Philadelphia he will explore his relationship with his former pastor and the uproar it has stirred. "The statements that were the source of controversy from Reverend Wright were wrong, and I strongly condemn them," the senator from Illinois said Monday at a town hall meeting in Monaca, Pa. But he added: "I think the caricature that is being painted of him is not accurate. And so part of what I'll do tomorrow is to talk a little bit about how some of these issues are perceived from within the black church community, for example, which I think views this very differently."

Obama indicated over the weekend that he plans to remain a member at Trinity largely because Wright is no longer the pastor. It is an ironic twist, given that Obama says that he may never have embraced Christianity had he not been entranced by Wright's impassioned advocacy of social justice while working as a community organizer in the late 1980s. Obama had shied from religion until he heard Wright interweave the Bible with the black experience, and Obama's discovery of Trinity made him feel at home in South Chicago. He titled his autobiography "The Audacity of Hope" after one of Wright's sermons.

"The senator is not naive, and what he's doing is very hard," said Shaun Casey, a religious adviser to Obama's campaign. "He's trying to remain loyal to his pastor but also differentiate himself politically."

But politics and faith have melded together at Trinity since Wright moved here in 1972 to lead a dying congregation of about 80 members. The son of a preacher in Philadelphia, Wright aspired to interpret Jesus through the lens of Chicago's poorest neighborhood -- through slavery, poverty and the civil rights movement. He studied books written by James H. Cone, who created a movement called

black liberation theology, and consulted Cone for advice.

"The Christian faith has been interpreted largely by those who enslaved black people, and by the people who segregated them," said Cone, a professor at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. "Black liberation theology is an attempt to understand religion without apologizing for being black. [Wright] is really the one who took it from my books and brought it to the church."

Wright was a particularly qualified pioneer, with a master's degree from Howard University and six years of doctoral work at the University of Chicago. His secret at Trinity, though, was an ability to "make it plain," parishioners said. He translated the Bible into lessons about apartheid in South Africa, the misguided pursuit of "middle-classness" and subprime mortgage lending. He encouraged parishioners to identify with their African heritage, and he led a trip to the continent each year.

Wright preferred to study the Bible and write his three weekly sermons alone in the church office, but he became an extrovert on Sundays. A talented musician, he built a band, a choir and a dance group at Trinity, and he sometimes moonlighted in all three. He moved like a dancer in slow motion behind the pulpit, twisting his hips and pumping a fist to emphasize each phrase. His gravelly baritone could instill tranquility or terror, depending on the sermon.

Wright attracted a congregation that colleagues herald as the most diverse of any black church in the United States. Obama, Oprah Winfrey, gangsters, bankers, destitute women in ratty sweatshirts -- all cram into Trinity's pews, and Wright demanded that they all hold hands. When other black churches moved out of Chicago in the 1990s and relocated in the suburbs, Wright insisted that Trinity build a new church right next to its old one, half a block from the train tracks.

Most Sundays, he spoke to older folks at a 7:30 a.m. service, and to the casual bluejeans crowd at 6 p.m. But Wright tended to save his most impassioned sermons for a lively three-hour midday service, when his 40-minute address was cushioned by enough music and dancing to keep the crowd on its feet. Depending on the listener, some of his most memorable sermons were either diatribes about white supremacy, or inspirational addresses that called for the empowerment of the disenfranchised.

Usually, Wright's sermons drew an overflow crowd for all three Sunday services, so parishioners learned to arrive an hour early to ensure a seat. Latecomers sat on folding chairs in two rooms in the bowels of the church, where they could watch a television broadcast of the service. Hundreds more watched Wright preach via streaming Internet broadcasts or the DVDs sold at the church gift shop that now have armed his critics.

"Things that might mean one thing in the church take on a new meaning when you don't see the full sermon, or understand the full context," said Dwight Howard, a theologian and a longtime Trinity member.

Said Cone: "There are moments for [Wright] when the anger, when the rage about what's happened to poor black people in the ghetto is so tough, so deeply painful, that he says things most whites would find off the charts and unpatriotic. But you don't preach in sound bites."

Wright's portrayal has been typical of the misunderstanding of the black church, his peers said. The fact that Wright worked to empower one people, Atlanta theologian Jacquelyn Grant said, hardly qualifies him as racist.

If he were racist, Wright's friends ask, why would he arrange bus trips for predominantly white congregations to visit Trinity each Sunday? If he were racist, why would he have steadfastly maintained Trinity's relationship with the United Church of Christ, a denomination with only a handful of black churches?

"He's been a wonderful friend to white pastors, and he's gifted the organization financially," said UCC President John H. Thomas. "That charge is false."

Earlier this month, before he stepped behind the Trinity pulpit for the first time, Moss tried to sort through the tension that now surrounds Wright. He sought advice from his father, the Rev. Otis Moss Jr., a former preacher at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and a friend of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. The father reminded his son that some civil rights leaders were initially perceived as heroes in the black church and rogues in white America. The same gulf, Moss III concluded, still divides society now.

It is an insight that could forecast more tension for Obama, who had hoped to distance himself from Wright while reaffirming his bond with the black church that still reveres him.

"There are two narratives that have been created with what's going on right now," Moss said. "There's the narrative of the African American church community that understands what has happened, that knows [Wright's] record and his legacy. And then there's the narrative of the wider community that doesn't understand.

"Part of this is indicative of the fact that our two communities still see the world very differently. There's a divide there, a gap that history will have to correct."

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