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Obama Found a Home in His Church

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CHICAGO -- A young Barack Obama was searching for answers, and perhaps a place to belong, when he decided to visit a fast-growing church recommended by friends. What he heard left him in tears.

The Rev. Jeremiah Wright preached that day about suffering _ about the seemingly endless problems of the world and of individuals. But he also talked about the importance of hope, the audacity of believing things can be made better.

"Hope is what saves us," Wright said.

That message moved Obama to embrace Trinity United Church of Christ, along with its philosophy of translating faith into action. But it's a side of Wright that has been overshadowed by his inflammatory remarks about everything from race relations to the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

The furor over Wright's remarks has provoked the greatest crisis for Obama's presidential campaign thus far, but Obama has refused to leave Trinity or sever his ties with Wright, saying there is much more to Wright and the church.

Asked Wednesday on MSNBC's "Hardball" if he thought the questions about his relationship with Wright were unfair, Obama said: "I think that's fair game in the sense that what my former pastor said was offensive. I think that in politics, whether I was white, black, Hispanic or Asian, somebody would be trying to use it against me. I do think that it is important to keep things in perspective."

Trinity is a predominantly black congregation in a mainline, mostly white denomination _ the United Church of Christ. Its 8,000 members include politicians, doctors, lawyers and other leaders on Chicago's South Side.

The rapper Common, the former director of the Illinois Department of Public Health, the former director of the state Department of Professional Regulation, and at least one state representative are members of the church. Oprah Winfrey has attended services there.

The church offers a long list of services _ housing and employment programs, scholarships, a ministry to people with HIV/AIDS _ that mesh well with Obama's political philosophy.

"It's his deep faith in God and his desire to be an agent of change in the world. That's kind of the Trinity mantra," said the Rev. Michael Pfleger, a priest at a South Side Roman Catholic church.

Obama, 46, eventually joined Trinity and was baptized there. Wright performed his wedding ceremony and baptized Obama's two daughters. Years later, he took the theme of Wright's sermon as the title for a book, "The Audacity of Hope."

Most Americans know Wright only from video excerpts of sermons in which he says God should damn the United States for its racism, accuses the government of spreading AIDS and suggests the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks were retribution for the country's past wrongs. Obama's long connection with Wright has raised doubts among some voters about Obama's beliefs and judgment.

His Democratic rival, Hillary Rodham Clinton, said she would have left the church if it had been her pastor saying such things. Obama denounced the most inflammatory of Wright's comments, which he said he didn't know about until recently. But he acknowledges, without providing any detail, hearing Wright make other controversial remarks.

In response the controversy generated by Wright's remarks, leaders of the national United Church of Christ and the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA are calling for a nationwide "sacred conversation" about race. United Church of Christ leaders are also asking ministers in the church's 5,700 congregations, seminaries and other ministry settings to preach about race on Sunday, May 18.

Obama argues it would be wrong for people to judge Wright solely on a handful of remarks. He has tried to place Wright's comments in the context of anger from a black man who came of age in a time of segregation and civil rights turmoil.

In his first book, "Dreams from My Father," which includes Obama's account of his tearful visit to Trinity, Obama described the impact of working closely with South Side churches as a community organizer in the late 1980s. A religious skeptic, he was moved by their devotion and by the support that churches provided their members.

Friends urged Obama to consider joining a church, often mentioning Trinity. Mike Kruglik, a co-worker at the time, said joining helped Obama connect to the local pastors who were vital to his organizing efforts and that Trinity, where many professionals were doing community work, was a logical choice.

"It was very well within the mainstream of the community. It wasn't radical at all," said John Owens, another organizer who worked with

Obama at the time.

Jerry Kellman, who hired Obama as a community organizer and is now a lay minister for Chicago's Catholic archdiocese, said Trinity offered a kind of home for Obama, particularly after he got engaged and was planning a family. Its members ranged from the wealthy and well-educated to families just scraping by, he said.

"When Barack joined the church, he wasn't giving his allegiance to Wright. He was joining a community," Kellman said.

Trinity, like other United Church of Christ churches, relies heavily on the membership to make decisions through boards and committees, he added. Even as senior pastor, Wright did not single-handedly control Trinity's direction.

Trinity was an early leader in ministering to people with HIV and AIDS. It offers housing and employment programs to people in need. It has scholarship programs and services for cancer patients, domestic abuse victims, drug addicts and more.

Members are expected to volunteer for one or more of these ministries. They usually announce their choice on the same day they're baptized, said Jane Fisler Hoffman, a United Church of Christ minister who joined Trinity.

"There's this kind of constant encouragement to live your faith, learn your faith," she said.

The church proclaims itself "unashamedly black and unapologetically Christian." It supports charity work in Africa, gives some of its ministries Swahili names, uses Africa-themed decorations.

People familiar with Trinity compare its emphasis on African culture to the way some Catholic churches play up Irish or Italian roots. And they emphatically reject the accusations in widely circulated e-mails that the church is separatist or turns away white members.

"That's such a bunch of hooley," said Hoffman, who is white.

She tells the story of a group of young Germans visiting the church. Wright met with them before the service and prayed with them in German, she said. Later, he delivered part of his sermon in German and the choir sang in German.

"To me, it's a testimony that this is not a church that rejects people of other cultures and races," she said.

She and others say Wright is far from the hothead he may appear to be in video excerpts. They describe him as a serious biblical scholar who thinks carefully about issues.

"Wright is one of the most respected pastors in the African-American church in the United States," said Kellman, who nevertheless says Wright "blew it" in a few sermons.

Pfleger, one of Chicago's most outspoken members of the clergy, said Wright and Obama are similar in their intellectual approach. "They examine things, they study things. They are not quick to make judgments," he said.

Wright's sermons, even when they included strong critiques of racism and inequality in America, were always grounded in the Bible, church members said. Wright sometimes used harsh, painful language, his supporters acknowledge, but mostly he was well within a black tradition of emotional, social commentary.

"It's just speaking a different language to a slightly different culture," said Dwight Hopkins, a Trinity member and a theology professor at the University of Chicago, "and I can see how someone in the suburbs in the high Episcopal church would see those snippets as angry."

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