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## Pentecostalism Obscured in Palin Biography

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ST. PAUL, Minn. -- Sarah Palin often identifies herself simply as Christian.

Yet John McCain's running mate has deep roots in Pentecostalism, a spirit-filled Christian tradition that is one of the fastest growing in the world. It's often derided by outsiders and Bible-believers alike.

Palin was baptized Roman Catholic as a newborn. She was then baptized in a Pentecostal Assemblies of God church as a teen and attended that church until six years ago, when she and her family adopted a different home church, an independent evangelical church.

Maria Comella, a spokeswoman for the McCain-Palin campaign, has said Palin attends different churches and does not consider herself Pentecostal.

Details of Palin's religious background and its influence on her public policy are still emerging. As Alaska governor, she signed a proclamation as Alaska's governor honoring Christian Heritage Week and said creationism shouldn't be barred from classroom discussions.

She used traditional evangelical language in praying that a natural gas pipeline be built in Alaska and that the U.S. mission in Iraq was a "task that is from God." Yet she's also said she would not force her views on others.

Palin identifies herself only as Christian in her biography on the National Governors' Association Web site. In an Aug. 14 interview with Time magazine, she once again described herself as Christian. When pressed, she said she attended a "nondenominational Bible church."

"I was baptized Catholic as a newborn and then my family started going to nondenominational churches throughout our life," she said. She did not mention her longtime association with the Assemblies of God, which claims nearly 3 million members and is one of the biggest Pentecostal groups in the U.S.

Grant Wacker, an expert in Pentecostalism at Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C., said he can understand why. He said the McCain campaign likely doesn't want Palin associated with the best-known Pentecostal to ever hold public office, former U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, an active member of the Assemblies of God.

"Though Pentecostals are diverse and rapidly mainstreaming themselves, the public still perceives them as sectarian and uncompromising, and those traits will not help Palin's image," Wacker said.

Palin was baptized as a teenager in Alaska at the Wasilla Assembly of God, which she and her family attended until 2002.

"The fact is she has grown up and has associated with one of our Assemblies of God churches, which is a Pentecostal church, for years," said the Rev. Bill Welch, superintendent of the denomination's Alaska District. "Pentecostalism is bound to have some kind of impact and influence on her."

Pentecostals are conservative in their reading of the Bible and, often, culture.

The Rev. Ed Kalnins, senior pastor at Wasilla Assembly of God since 1999, once questioned in a sermon whether people who voted for Democratic Sen. John Kerry in the 2004 presidential election would get into heaven.

Unlike most other Christians \_ including most evangelicals \_ Pentecostals believe in "baptism in the Holy Spirit." That can manifest itself through speaking in tongues, modern-day prophesy and faith healing.

The Assemblies of God teaches that spirit baptism must be accompanied by speaking in tongues. Still, some churchgoers never have the experience.

Before running for Alaska governor, Palin also frequented Wasilla's Church on the Rock, an independent Pentecostal church, senior pastor David Pepper said in a statement.

About six years ago, the Palins began attending their current church home, Wasilla Bible Church, an independent evangelical congregation of truck drivers, executives and teachers, pastor Larry Kroon said.

It's a "simple community church," Kroon said, that is not Pentecostal. Still, Palin has remained close to the Pentecostal community.

Her pastor for most of her time at Wasilla Assembly of God, Paul Riley, said he gave the invocation at Palin's inauguration. As governor, she renamed the church's street "Riley Avenue" for him.

She sometimes worships at Juneau Christian Center, another Assemblies of God church, said Brad Kesler of the Alaska District of the Assemblies of God.

Palin used mostly traditional evangelical language when she spoke at a June ceremony for future mission workers at the Wasilla Assembly of God. A video of her talk was posted on the church Web site, then turned up elsewhere on the Internet.

Noting that her oldest son, Track, an Army private, is being sent to Iraq this month, Palin asked the audience to pray for military men and women. She also asked for prayer "that our leaders, our national leaders, are sending them out on a task that is from God."

"That's what we have to make sure that we're praying for \_ that there is a plan and that that plan is God's plan," she said.

She spoke about her responsibilities as governor, including job creation, and said she was trying to win support for a multibillion-dollar pipeline that would bring natural gas from Alaska's North Slope to the lower 48 states.

"I think God's will has to be done in unifying people and companies to get that gas line built," she said. "So pray for that."

Still, she said the state needed more than just economic development.

"Really, all of that stuff doesn't do any good if the people of Alaska's heart isn't right with God," she said. "Your job is going to be to be out there reaching the people \_ hurting people \_ throughout Alaska and we can work together to make sure God's will be done here."

Her current church, Wasilla Bible Church, stresses the inerrancy of Scripture.

Last Sunday's church bulletin advertised an upcoming Focus on the Family "Love Won Out Conference" in Anchorage. The conferences promise to "help men and women dissatisfied with living homosexually

understand that same-sex attractions can be overcome."

Palin opposes abortion and gay marriage. But in December 2006, she told The Associated Press that her stances on certain lightning-rod issues would not necessarily translate into public policy.

"I've honestly answered the questions on what my personal views are on things like abortion and a lot of controversial issues," she said. "I won't hesitate to answer those questions about what my personal views are, but I am not one to be out there preaching and forcing my views on anyone else."

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Zoll reported from New York.

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