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In Palin's Life and Politics, Goal to Follow God's Will

By [KIRK JOHNSON](#) and [KIM SEVERSON](#)

WASILLA, Alaska — Shortly after taking office as governor in 2006, [Sarah Palin](#) sent an e-mail message to Paul E. Riley, her former pastor in the Assembly of God Church, which her family began attending when she was a youth. She needed spiritual advice in how to do her new job, said Mr. Riley, who is 78 and retired from the church.

"She asked for a biblical example of people who were great leaders and what was the secret of their leadership," Mr. Riley said.

He wrote back that she should read again from the Old Testament the story of Esther, a beauty queen who became a real one, gaining the king's ear to avert the slaughter of the Jews and vanquish their enemies. When Esther is called to serve, God grants her a strength she never knew she had.

Mr. Riley said he thought Ms. Palin had lived out the advice as governor, and would now do so again as the [Republican Party](#)'s vice-presidential nominee.

"God has given her the opportunity to serve," he said. "And God has given her the strength to carry out her goals."

Ms. Palin's religious life — what she believes and how her beliefs intersect or not with her life in public office in Alaska — has become a topic of intense interest and scrutiny across the political spectrum as she has risen from relative obscurity to become Senator [John McCain](#)'s running mate.

Interviews with the two pastors she has been most closely associated with here in her hometown — she now attends the Wasilla Bible Church, though she keeps in touch with Mr. Riley and recently spoke at an event at his former church — and with friends and acquaintances who have worshipped with her point to a firm conclusion: her foundation and source of guidance is the Bible, and with it has come a conviction to be God's servant.

"Just be amazed at the umbrella of this church here, where God is going to send you from this church," Ms. Palin told the gathering in June of young graduates of a ministry program at the Assembly of God Church, a video of which has been posted on YouTube.

"Believe me," she said, "I know what I am saying — where God has sent me, from underneath the umbrella of this church, throughout the state."

Janet Kincaid, who has known Ms. Palin for about 15 years and worked with her on some Wasilla town boards and commissions when Ms. Palin was mayor here, said Ms. Palin's spiritual path, from the Assembly of God to Wasilla Bible, has had a consistent theme.

"The churches that Sarah has attended all believe in a literal translation of the Bible," Ms. Kincaid said. "Her principal ethical and moral beliefs stem from this."

Prayer, and belief in its power, is another constant theme, Ms. Kincaid said, in what she has witnessed in Ms. Palin. "Her beliefs are firm in the power of prayer — let's put it that way," she said.

Maria Comella, a spokeswoman for the McCain-Palin campaign, said Ms. Palin had been baptized Roman Catholic as an infant, but declined to comment further.

"We're not going to get into discussing her religion," she said.

In the address at the Assembly of God Church here, Ms. Palin's ease in talking about the intersection of faith and public life was clear. Among other things, she encouraged the group of young church leaders to pray that "God's will" be done in bringing about the construction of a big pipeline in the state, and suggested her work as governor would be hampered "if the people of Alaska's heart isn't right with God."

She also told the group that her eldest child, Track, would soon be deployed by the Army to Iraq, and that they should pray "that our national leaders are sending them out on a task that is from God, that's what we have to make sure we are praying for, that there is a plan, and that plan is God's plan."

Larry Kroon, who has been the presiding pastor at Wasilla Bible for the last 30 years, declined to describe Ms. Palin's beliefs or the role she plays in the church, but suggested that she is more of a back-bencher than a leading light.

"Todd and Sarah come in as Todd and Sarah — they're very discreet about it," he said, referring to Ms. Palin's husband.

One of the musical directors at the church, Adele Morgan, who has known Ms. Palin since the third grade, said the Palins moved to the nondenominational Wasilla Bible Church in 2002, in part because its ministry is less "extreme" than Pentecostal churches like the Assemblies of God, which practice speaking in tongues and miraculous healings.

"A lot of churches are about music and media and having a big profile," Ms. Morgan said. "We are against that. That is why it is so attractive to politicians because they can just sit there and be safe."

"We've gotten a lot of their people when the other churches get too extreme," Ms. Morgan continued. However, she added, "If you lift your hands when we're singing, we're not going to shoot you down."

Mr. Kroon (pronounced krone), a soft-spoken, bearded Alaska native, said he was convinced that the Bible is the Word of God, and that the task of believers is to ponder and analyze the book for meaning — including scrutiny, he said, for errors and mistranslations over the centuries that may have obscured the original intent.

It is that analysis, he believes, not anything he preaches, that makes most people in his church socially conservative, he said.

"I trust my people can go out with that and they can deal with an issue such as abortion — any issue out there — whether it's in the public arena, or in the hospital room with their relative dying of cancer, because they will be equipped with a biblical perspective that will enable them to react in that situation," said Mr. Kroon, who described himself as "pro-life."

"Our congregation would tend to be conservative, and it's not because I've told them to be," he said.

Some Jewish groups have raised concerns since the announcement of Ms. Palin's selection to the Republican ticket that discussions in the Wasilla Bible Church might go beyond conservatism. Last month, a leader in the group Jews for Jesus, which advocates converting Jews to Christianity — but which has been accused by some Jews of anti-Semitism — spoke at the church. The speaker, David Brickner, spoke enthusiastically about the "miracle" of conversions in Israel by the group's missionaries.

The church has also come under fire among some gay advocacy groups for promoting an upcoming Focus on the Family conference in Anchorage dealing with the so-called curing of homosexuality.

The Wasilla Bible Church, which draws 800 to 1,000 people for Sunday service, itself is discreet to the point of self-effacement. Only a single small sign on the gravel road leading up to the property declares the name. On the three-year-old building itself, which looks more like a warehouse than a cathedral, a large cross over the rear entrance is the only declaration of purpose.

People who know the church and its parishioners say that the mix of simplicity and quirkiness is common in Alaska, where many people have moved over the years and left their pasts and old church lives behind.

Homegrown churches like Wasilla — started in the early 1970s by a handful of families, including Ms. Morgan's, during the construction boom in building the Trans-Alaska pipeline — have become singularly Alaskan. Mr. Kroon still remembers the days of a single room with a wood-burning stove that he would have to fire up before services.

Mr. Kroon said the Alaskan spirit of go-it-alone individuality gives the church a mix of joiners and resolute nonjoiners. The church offers full-immersion water baptism, which some people want and others do not.

"I have people who've been here since I got here, and they still say, 'Don't put me on the membership roll,'" he said. "There's definitely a cultural element."

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