

washingtonpost.com

## Churches across America reflect on Obama election

Advertisement

By ALLEN G. BREED

The Associated Press

Sunday, November 9, 2008; 6:22 PM

RALEIGH, N.C. -- Jubilation, pride and relief permeated pews and pulpits at predominantly black churches across the country on the first Sunday after Barack Obama's election, with congregants blowing horns, waving American flags and raising their hands to the heavens.

"God has vindicated the black folk," the Rev. Shirley Caesar-Williams said as a member of her Raleigh congregation, Mount Calvary Word of Faith Church, brandished a flag and another marched among the pews blowing a ram's horn.

"Too long we've been at the bottom of the totem pole, but he has vindicated us, hallelujah," the Grammy-winning gospel singer cried. "I don't know about you, but I don't have nothing to put my head down for, praise God. Because when I look toward Washington, D.C., we got a new family coming in. We got a new family coming in. And you know what? They look like us. Amen, amen. They look like us."

In the historically black New York City neighborhood of Harlem, Obama buttons and T-shirts were as prevalent in the pews as colorful plumed hats, while in a church in the former capital of the Confederacy, a young girl handled a newspaper with a photo of Obama and the headline, "Mr. President."

At Los Angeles' oldest black church, ushers circulated through the aisles with boxes of tissues as men and women, young and old, wept openly and unabashedly at the fall of the nation's last great racial barrier.

And on the day that the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. famously called "the most segregated day of the week," black and white Christian clergy members asked God to give Obama the wisdom and strength to lead the country out of what many consider a wilderness of despair and gloom.

At Hungary Road Baptist Church in a working-class suburb of Richmond, Va., the service was part celebration, part history lesson, led by a pastor who had felt the sting of the Jim Crow South. The Rev. J. Rayfield Vines Jr., pastor of the predominantly African-American congregation, paused briefly as he recalled the indignities he endured but did not bow to while growing up Suffolk, in southeastern Virginia.

"I was there when you had ride in the back of the bus," Vines said under a simple cross illuminated by eight light bulbs. "I was there when you went to the department store and you couldn't try on the clothes. I was there when they had a colored toilet and a white toilet."

The pastor said he shared his humiliations Sunday to help give those "who had not tasted the bitterness of segregation ... an idea why we all shouted."

Inside Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church, member Sheila Chestnut, 61, proudly wore a rhinestone Obama pin on her suit lapel.

"I am so happy," she said. "I cried so much. I never thought that in this lifetime I would live to see an African-American become president of these United States."

When the Rev. Calvin Butts invited the congregation to stand up "and give God praise for the election," several hundred churchgoers rose as one, lifted their hands and gave a sustained cheer, then chanted, "Yes we can! Yes we can!"

At Apostolic Church of God on Chicago's South Side, less than two miles from Obama's home, jubilant Sunday services were peppered with references to the election and calls to be grateful for his victory.

"We thank the Lord for this second Sunday (in November) after the first Tuesday," Dr. Byron Brazier said to resounding applause and cheers from the mostly black congregation. "This is a wonderful time to be alive."

Obama spoke at Apostolic on Father's Day in his first address to a congregation after leaving his longtime church, Trinity United Church of Christ, following inflammatory remarks there by his former longtime pastor and others.

In Los Angeles, tears flowed freely at the First AME Church during the raucous two-hour service of house-busting music and prayer. There were some white and yellow faces among the congregants, and the Rev. John J. Hunter felt the need to let them know they were not being left out.

"The smiles on our faces are not gloating looks of victory," he said. "The smiles on our faces are not the sign or any symbol that it is now our time and our chance to get even. Rather, the smiles on our faces are expressions of thanksgiving."

At a white church in Mississippi, where roughly nine in 10 whites voted for Republican John McCain, the scene was more muted.

The neighborhood around the Alta Woods United Methodist Church in Jackson has seen its demographics shift from white to black in recent decades, and most of the parishioners have moved to the suburbs. While the Rev. David W. Carroll recognized Obama's election as a "historic shift," he spent just as much time praising McCain's patriotism in defeat.

"As the crowd began to boo a little bit ... he quieted them down and said, 'Now is not my time, but I'm an American first and I will serve the president-elect,'" he said. "In a loss, he showed us still how he could win through his service."

In his Web message last week, the Rev. Gregg Matte of Houston's mostly white First Baptist Church decried a society that has turned to government as its savior. "Today," he wrote, "Hollywood is our pastor, technology is our Bible, charisma is our value and Barack Obama is our President."

But from the pulpit Sunday, Matte asked the 1,000 or so mostly white faces staring back at him to "lift up President-elect Obama" even if he wasn't their choice on Tuesday.

"Regardless of whether you voted for him or not, he's now our president come Jan. 20," he said. "So we're going to come behind him and pray for him and pray for wisdom, that God will give him wisdom and be able to really speak to his heart."

Perhaps nowhere was the weight of history more palpable Sunday than at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, from whose pulpit King spread his message of inclusion and across from which he lies entombed.

When the Rev. Raphael G. Warnock tried to put into words what it meant for Obama to win Virginia, where the first American slaves landed nearly 400 years ago, his words were drowned out by applause and cheers from a capacity crowd whose faces captured the spectrum of the human rainbow.

"Barack Obama stood against the fierce tide of history and achieved the unimaginable," he said. "But he did not get here by himself. Give God some credit. He is the Lord."

But while he told the congregation that it was a time for celebration, he also reminded them it was a serious time.

"We still have a whole lot of work to do," he said. "You have two little girls who will grow up in the White House. Around the corner, you have two little girls who will grow up in a crack house."

Among those in attendance was the slain civil rights leader's sister, Christine King Farris. She was reminded of her brother's prescience.

"As he predicted the night before he left us, 'I may not be with you, but as a people we will reach the promised land,'" she said stoically. "That promised land was realized Tuesday. Yes, it is our promised land."

---

Contributing to this report were Associated Press writers Gillian Flaccus in Los

Angeles, Andrew Adler in Atlanta, Karen Matthews in New York, Steve Szkotak in Richmond, Karen Hawkins in Chicago, John Porretto in Houston and Timothy R. Brown in Jackson.

© 2008 The Associated Press