



washingtonpost.com

Obama election shows deep racial divide in church

Advertisement

By RACHEL ZOLL

The Associated Press

Thursday, November 6, 2008; 6:30 PM

NEW YORK -- The barrier-crossing election of Barack Obama did little to bridge the deep racial divide in American churches. In fact, some clergy say it has only served to underscore their differences.

While nonwhite Christians voted overwhelmingly for Obama, most white Christians backed John McCain, according to exit polls. Several black clergy said that criticism of Obama by some white Christians over his religious beliefs and support for abortion rights crossed the line, hurting longtime efforts to reconcile their communities.

"I think in the eagerness to protect the right to life issues, there were some things said, not about that issue, that were not always fair and that were insensitive that need to be rethought," said Bishop T.D. Jakes, a prominent African-American pastor and founder of The Potter's House, a theologically conservative megachurch in Dallas. "I would love to see black and white Christians find common ground, and a deeper understanding of each other's needs."

The Rev. Al Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, the denomination's flagship school, said white evangelicals backed McCain because of his opposition to abortion rights, not because of the race of either candidate.

"White conservative evangelicals, not just in this election, but in many successive cycles, tended to vote on the basis of moral issues," Mohler said. "Those evangelicals will still join in celebrating, very eagerly, that America has elected an African-American president and see it as a cause for celebration and recognize its deep spiritual significance."

According to Associated Press exit polls, 34 percent of white Protestants voted for Obama, while 65 percent went with McCain. Obama won the overall Roman Catholic vote, but white Catholics backed McCain by a slim majority, 52 percent to 47 percent. Among white Christians, the racial gap was most pronounced with evangelicals: 74 percent backed McCain, 24 percent backed Obama.

The pattern is not new and fits the larger trend of white voters overall, the majority of whom voted for McCain. Even so, white Christians were still part of Obama's winning coalition, drawing millions of their votes. However, the racial

gaps stood out at a time when African-American churchgoers exulted in the historic first of Obama's victory.

"The contrast between the white religious community and the nonwhite religious community ... is particularly strong this year," said John Green, an expert on religion and politics and senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life.

White conservative Christians are more concerned than ever about reaching out to minorities, particularly as immigration has led to what some call the "browning" of American Christianity. Right now, nearly all U.S. churches serve a single ethnic group.

While white and black Christian conservatives generally share an opposition to abortion rights and gay marriage, they often split over how to end social ills such as poverty and crime.

But the rhetoric this year went beyond the usual differences over worldview, said Derrick W. Hutchins, a leader in the Church of God in Christ. The predominantly African-American group is Pentecostal and one of the largest denomination's in the country.

Hutchins was angered by repeated accusations that he and other black theological conservatives had abandoned their religious beliefs simply to vote for an African-American. The claims came not only from white Christians, but also from some blacks who backed McCain.

"What they did is insult our biblical understanding," said Hutchins, who voted for Obama and has backed Democrats in past presidential elections. "The white religious right-wing determined that if you didn't vote for McCain, you were not meeting a standard of the Bible."

The Rev. Kirbyjon Caldwell, an African-American Methodist pastor from Houston, said that some white Christian conservatives had helped fuel false rumors that Obama was Muslim, by questioning whether he was truly Christian and calling his support for abortion rights "demonic" and "diabolical."

Caldwell, an Obama supporter who backed President Bush in the past two elections, said other candidates have diverged dramatically from Christian teachings in their policies and personal lives and have not been maligned as Obama has.

"Some members of the Christian community want to label him as the anti-Christ," said Caldwell. "What has he done to deserve that label, when none of his predecessors are so characterized?"

But Bishop Harry Jackson, an African-American pastor of Hope Christian Church in Washington, D.C., and a McCain supporter, said questions about Obama's

more liberal reading of Scripture was fair game. Jackson noted that Obama became an observant Christian through the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, former pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Videos of Wright's sermons that circulated widely earlier this year showed him cursing the government and accusing it of conspiring against blacks. Obama eventually left the church.

"Many, many people question whether Barack Obama had been under a legitimate Christian leadership figure," Jackson said. "I personally never ascribed any vitriolic character assassination to it."

© 2008 The Associated Press