

God and the Black Vote

African American Christians typically vote for Democrats. But because

same-sex marriage is a key issue this year, some say they're not sure how they will vote.

Kimberly Daniels paces across the platform at Truth and Deliverance International Ministries in Chicago, telling the mostly African American congregation that this November isn't a good time to play civil rights politics.

"Secular humanism is why we're struggling to maintain the foundations of marriage in this country. We are not warring against flesh and blood!" shouts Daniels, founding pastor of Spoken Word Ministries in Jacksonville, Florida, a church that emphasizes deliverance from demons.

Daniels hammers her point forcefully: "It is not about a political party! It is not about black and white! It is about light and darkness! A line is being drawn in America, and the next election will prove whose side everybody is on!"

This sermon is unlike any other message heard in a black church in Chicago. And Daniels is no ordinary black preacher.

Raised in a tough inner-city Jacksonville community, the daughter of a civil-rights activist father, she is an upper-middle-class African American baby boomer who plans to support President Bush in the upcoming election. She says many African Americans vote blindly for Democrats out of tradition.

"Those who are the sons of God have to be led by the Spirit of God," she told Charisma later. "When I go places, people

repent [of racism and of hating Bush] because I don't give them my opinion; I give them the Word."

Travel 820 miles east of Chicago to Mount Vernon, New York, and you'll get a totally different sermon. "George Bush is a mean-spirited man," pastor Carlton Spruill told congregants at Allen Memorial Church of God in Christ (COGIC). "He's gone back on his promises of faith-based charity. Everybody knows he's lying about Iraq."

But 46-year-old Spruill, a registered Democrat, has taken issue with his own party. "The Democratic Party supports same-sex marriage. Homosexuality is a perversion that will destroy America, just as it destroyed Rome and Sodom and Gomorrah," he says. "I know that voting is a precious right, but this time I don't see how I can vote. I'm very challenged by this dilemma."

A Tough Choice

Whether they embrace Daniels' position or identify with Spruill, many African American Christians say they're in a quandary this year. Though they vehemently oppose gay marriage, most aren't willing to re-elect Bush to a second term in office. That opposition to Bush isn't unlike the last presidential election, when more than 90 percent of African American Christians supported Al Gore, while 80 percent of white Christians voted for Bush, according to a University of Akron poll.

For many conservatives, including some blacks, it's ironic that African Americans would be so strongly opposed to the party of Abraham Lincoln, the president who issued the

Emancipation Proclamation. But the Republicans who freed slaves in 1863 aren't the same Republicans often branded as racists by many African Americans today.

Those Republicans emerged in the 1960s, at the height of the struggle for civil rights. Southern "Dixiecrats" such as Strom Thurmond switched parties to resist liberal Democrats' efforts to desegregate the South. Meanwhile President Kennedy and his successor, Lyndon Johnson, endeared themselves to African Americans by supporting racial integration, voting rights for blacks and equal employment opportunity.

When the Voting Rights Act passed in 1965, hundreds of thousands of Southern blacks registered for the first time, siding with the group that had shown them the most support: the Democratic Party.

That allegiance continued through the 1970s, as many opposed the Vietnam War, a conflict that cost a disproportionate number of African American lives. It continued in the 1980s, when President Reagan opposed affirmative action and cut funding for unemployment, housing and education programs that many African Americans supported.

"Reagan's policies set African Americans back by 20 years," says one Florida resident who asked to remain anonymous.

It was also during the 1980s that the divergent political views between black and white Christians became apparent. As the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition emerged to lead the fight against abortion, it quickly became evident that African Americans, a community well known for its deep Christian devotion, would not be allies.

“The reason why abortion was never a major issue in the African American community is because the African American community never really was ... pro-abortion,” says the Rev. Frank M. Reid, pastor of Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Baltimore.

A Fierce Battle

Reid, who ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1996, says many of the more politically active black pastors are both socially and morally liberal because they attended liberal seminaries. Their members, however, are largely “progressive” on social issues but conservative on moral ones.

He says abortion “was something that the majority of our members just didn’t even consider. ... So it became difficult for that to become an issue that would wedge us away from the historic social investment the Democratic Party had made.”

Though white women had more abortions in 2000 than any other ethnic group (41 percent), 32 percent of abortions that year were performed on black women, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute. Its 2003 report also noted that black women were more likely than other ethnic groups to resolve an unintended pregnancy through abortion.

“I think the reason we didn’t see what we traditionally believe about abortion translate into a vote at the polls is because our leaders didn’t address this in a political sense to their congregations,” says pastor Darryl Foster, who leads an ex-gay ministry in Atlanta called Witness Freedom Ministries.

“This is different with same-sex marriage. We’re seeing prominent African American bishops, pastors and apostles come forward and move this issue to the forefront of their congregations.”

Indeed, this summer the nation’s three largest African American denominations registered their opposition to gay marriage. The Church of God in Christ (COGIC) issued a proclamation denouncing same-sex marriage, while the National Baptist Convention USA stated that it doesn’t support same-sex marriage. The AME Church voted that its clergy could not perform marriages for same-sex couples.

At its annual convention, the predominantly black Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship collected 8,000 signatures on a petition supporting the Federal Marriage Amendment, which would define marriage as the union of one man and one woman. The group planned to urge the Congressional Black Caucus to support the amendment when it was presented before the House of Representatives in September.

Other leading black pastors have led marches supporting traditional marriage, with Seattle-area pastor Ken Hutcherson planning a Mayday for Marriage rally in Washington, D.C., this month. Ministers such as Reid have preached strongly against homosexuality.

“I wanted our people to be clear that we love the homosexual; we don’t love homosexuality,” he says. Meanwhile Foster is running an ad campaign declaring that gays can change their orientation through faith and counseling.

But if conservatives think opposition to gay marriage in the

black church will translate into black votes for Bush, they will have to think again. Reid is a registered Democrat and is still undecided.

"Both candidates have serious weaknesses around issues that are very important to me—budget deficits ... [the war] in Iraq, and the alleged oil involvement of Vice President Cheney," he says. "Kerry doesn't have a sterling record either."

"I'm hearing pastors say they are strongly opposed to gay marriage, but that they are not willing to cross the line to vote for Bush," says COGIC's presiding bishop, G.E. Patterson. He is warning COGIC's 10,000 pastors to "examine and strengthen their relationship with Christ" because a battle to stop pastors from preaching against homosexuality is on its way.

Foster agrees, saying that if gay marriage is legalized, condemnation of homosexuality could be deemed hate speech. He plans to support Bush in November because "if [Christians] ignore [gay marriage], then down the road Satan will use this against us in a way I don't think we'll be prepared for."

But for other African Americans, concern about gay marriage takes a back seat to such issues as economic opportunity, quality education and health-care access—interests that many say have been better served by Democrats. Still, Reid says the black Christian community "is in an extremely dangerous political transition."

While maintaining its commitment to uplift the needs of the poor, the black church must discuss its political priorities based on both its social and moral agendas, Reid says. "Our

political position and our vote cannot separate when it comes to where we stand on these very important moral principles that American secular religion is really attacking," he says.

"If we don't wake up and see that there is no division between our social stance and our moral stance, and begin to plot out a direction together, then what might happen is the black church might become apolitical and not support either party."

That, he adds, would be tragic because the black church would lose its political influence. He hopes one day African Americans will make both parties fight for their vote. In the meantime, he is not optimistic that the Democratic Party will change its position on abortion and gay marriage, even with prodding from African American Christians.

"The Democratic Party, on issues of biblical morality and biblical principles, is so sold out to the extreme left that I think the possibility of African American clergy who hold these views influencing the party is very small," the pastor says.

Reid sees a little more hope among the Republicans. "If the Republican Party woke up and began to really seriously dialogue and change some of their hardhearted positions on issues that are central to the African American community, it is possible that over the next 12 years they could chip away at that Democratic stronghold," he says.

Foster believes the nation is going to be surprised by African American voters next month. "We've got a lot of issues to sort out before November, but I think we're going to see some

things in the black electorate that we've never seen before," he says. "And I think the driving issue may be same-sex marriage because of our need to cling to what we know is right as opposed to issues that may, say, make us more prosperous."

Karynne Turner, Ph.D., isn't sure who she'll vote for, but she's leaning toward John Kerry. "In the past I've voted for Democrats, and unless the Lord leads me differently, I'll probably vote Democratic again this year," the Georgia State University business professor says.

Part of a multicultural charismatic church in Atlanta, she hears some Christians talk about how moral Bush is, "But I don't see him that way," she adds. "The war, the economy, the fact that he seems to not take time to re-evaluate things. I don't think he's willing to listen to people who have a different viewpoint than his."

She says she's concerned about gay marriage, but she's also alarmed by the size of Atlanta's homeless population. "Is it moral to see people poor and not help them? Is that any more immoral than gay marriage?"

As African American believers enter polling stations around the country to vote, a right their forefathers never had, they will face a huge dilemma. Do they stay with the party that defends civil rights and the poor? Or do they choose a party that rejects abortion and gay marriage?

Some black leaders told Charisma off the record that they don't plan to vote this year. They can't stomach another four years of Bush, but neither can they throw their hat in the ring with Kerry, who comes from the same state that legalized

homosexual marriage.

Others will go into the voting booth on November 2 and vote their conscience. Some will vote for the Democrat, others will vote for the Republican. And all of them will insist they were led by God.

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