

Instead of Judging Paula White Cain, I'll Pray for Her

If anyone had told me 20 years ago that Donald Trump would one day be president of the United States, I would have laughed and said: "That's as crazy as saying Paula White will be working for him in the White House."

Welcome to the bizarre world of 2019. Donald Trump, the billionaire businessman and reality TV star, sits in the Oval Office in the same year that rapper Kanye West made a gospel album. And last week Trump tapped Paula White Cain—a Pentecostal pastor now married to a former rock star—to serve as a religious adviser.

Some people will hate me for saying this, but I'll say it anyway. I'm praying for Paula.

Just as Trump's 2016 victory sent the American political establishment into total freak-out mode, the selection of Paula as a senior counselor on religious issues has prompted an outcry among political and media elites. It also raised eyebrows among Trump's most loyal Christian supporters, who view Paula with disdain because of her gender, her Pentecostal roots and her prosperity gospel message.

The mainstream media went after Paula after they learned of her association with Trump during his presidential campaign. The criticism got louder when she was one of six religious leaders who prayed during Trump's inauguration ceremony in January 2017. White was the first woman to ever lead an inaugural prayer.

She has been dismissed as a charlatan, partly because her ministry was investigated by U.S. Senator Charles Grassley in 2007 (no charges were ever filed) and because her flamboyant pulpit style includes some over-the-top fundraising gimmicks.

But I've watched Paula's career for 25 years, and I know she's a much more complex woman than her critics realize. Say what you will about her cringe-worthy appeals for "first fruits offerings" (tactics I've condemned in this column in the past), Paula is a sister in Christ who at least deserves our prayers as she tries to build spiritual bridges during the most divisive season in recent American history.

In the 1990s, Paula and her second husband, Randy, led Without Walls International, a booming charismatic megachurch in Tampa, Florida. Their roots were in the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee), a Pentecostal denomination that taught them to preach passionately and to reach the homeless, immigrants and the disenfranchised. Without Walls grew to more than 25,000 members in its heyday—and Paula became a celebrity.

I remember listening to one of her sermons in 2002. She told the audience in a rhythmic cadence: "I know I look like Gloria Copeland, but I preach like Jackie McCullough." (Copeland is white; McCullough is a black female preacher.) Paula's style is a mix of you-can-do-it motivational speaking and old-fashioned camp meeting fervor. Her audiences shout back at her with hallelujahs when she tells how she grew up in a trailer park but eventually bought a mansion.

Her folksy "Can I get an amen?" style endeared her to black audiences—and Without Walls became a fully integrated church. After Paula and Randy divorced in 2007, she became the pastor of New Destiny Christian Center, a predominantly African-American congregation in the Orlando area.

Paula began a friendship with Trump while she and Randy were pastoring the Tampa church. Trump had listened to one of her TV broadcasts and invited her to be on the set of *The Apprentice*. She got an apartment in Trump's Park Avenue building, and he sometimes attended her Bible studies there.

Fast-forward to 2019. Paula, now 53, restarted her life after her divorce from Randy. She married Jonathan Cain, who was a keyboardist for the rock group Journey. Since she began attending Oval Office prayer meetings and summits, Paula is often the only woman in a crowd of men wearing dark suits.

It is beyond ironic that many of the conservative preachers in these meetings don't believe women can be pastors. Yet the president they support calls Paula his pastor.

Paula's critics will most likely go after her with a vengeance now. They will ask why a female pastor would support a president who has been accused of being a womanizer. They will demand to know how she can tolerate some of Trump's statements that sound racist.

Whether or not you like her preaching or her politics, I don't believe for a minute that you can pin a racist label on Paula. *Ebony* magazine pointed out in 2007 that Paula was the most popular female preacher on the Black Entertainment Network. Since she was called to preach at age 18, she has spent most her time building bridges of racial reconciliation.

Yet while a majority of African-Americans support Democrats in elections, Paula has been a staunch defender of President Trump. During an interview on televangelist Jim Bakker's program in 2017, she said if God had not intervened in the 2016 election, religious liberties would have eroded to such an extent that people would have to pray in underground churches within five years.

"God says that He raises up and places all people in positions of authority," Paula said. "It is God who raises up a king. It is God who sets one down."

I don't know how long Paula will last in a White House known for its high turnover rate. But instead of condemning her for her flaws, I will pray that God uses her in the halls of power. In this crazy season of spiritual surprises, this

flawed woman preacher—who regularly prays for miracles—could possibly help our flawed president make wiser decisions, tone down his angry rhetoric and unite our divided nation. {eoa}