

McCain's faith, pastor hard to pigeonhole: Episcopalian and Baptist

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John McCain has a deep and personal Christian commitment despite his reluctance to speak publicly about it, according to the man that the Arizona senator and presumed GOP presidential nominee claims as his pastor.

Dan Yeary, pastor of North Phoenix Baptist Church, described the senator and his wife, Cindy, as “very unobtrusive” people who don’t seek special attention when they are able to come to worship. “They come in the side door. They’re very pleasant. They talk to people. They’re very approachable.”

But the man McCain calls “my family’s pastor” said his relationship with the candidate is not a particularly close one. Yeary said he’s done “no more [for McCain] than I would do for any church member” in the 7,000-member congregation.

McCain, a lifelong Episcopalian, has been attending the Southern Baptist-affiliated church in Phoenix for at least 17 years. But the candidate has neither officially joined the congregation nor opted for baptism there, which among Baptists is a public event linked with profession of faith. He lists his faith as Episcopal in official congressional biographies.

Nevertheless, the pastor said, lack of membership hasn’t kept McCain from becoming involved in the church. “I have a good relationship with John,” Yeary said. “I respect him as a friend. He is a very courageous man. And he has a delightful sense of humor.”

Yeary had been reluctant to talk to journalists about the McCains or his relationship with them, turning down many media requests to protect that relationship and the McCains’ privacy. But he recently initiated an interview with Associated Baptist Press in an attempt to quell continued journalistic curiosity about McCain’s faith, saying he trusts the independent news organization’s reputation for fairness.

About the same time, the Century's Amy Frykholm interviewed Yearly after telling him she would not include questions about McCain. (See page 10.) After the ABP story appeared, Baptist Press, the Southern Baptist Convention's official news service, obtained its own interview with Yearly.

McCain is a religious enigma to many observers because he does not fit the religio-political mold of many Christian conservatives. For instance, though he has consistently voted against abortion rights in the Senate, he has also supported government funding for embryonic stem cell research, which many conservative evangelicals consider tantamount to abortion.

McCain also opposed an attempt to amend the U.S. Constitution to ban same-sex marriage, citing states' rights (he supported adding such a ban to Arizona's state constitution). In his unsuccessful 2000 presidential campaign, he famously labeled Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson "agents of intolerance" during a speech.

Many prominent evangelicals have been mute on McCain. Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, a frequent critic of McCain, has moderated his tone lately but was quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* April 2 as saying McCain had insufficiently wooed social conservatives.

Many moderate Republicans and independents remain skeptical of McCain because he courted two far-right evangelical leaders and received their endorsements. One is San Antonio pastor and Christian Zionist leader John Hagee, whom Catholic and Jewish leaders have denounced for making statements interpreted as anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic. The other is Ohio pastor Rod Parsley, a politically active charismatic who has insisted that Islam must be "destroyed" and has been accused of denigrating gays, secularists and the separation of church and state.

But seeking clues to McCain's beliefs in his association with such religious figures would be misleading, according to Yearly. Contending that neither Hagee nor Parsley is representative of McCain's Christianity, Yearly said: "I think John reaches out to everybody. He's not afraid to spend time with people who have radically different views. That's intelligent."

Yearly, a Republican, stopped short of endorsing McCain himself. "It is a privilege and an honor to be this close to a man I've learned to love, who has the potential to be a great president for our country," he said. "I certainly am in favor of God's endorsement of his life."

McCain does not talk as easily about his faith as the current President Bush. In that regard, the candidate resembles Bush's father, who is also an Episcopalian.

Cindy McCain, meanwhile, is officially a Baptist. She was baptized at the Phoenix church in 1991, two years before Yearly became its pastor. The couple has attended ever since, the pastor said, as have their children—though they too have not joined.

Yearly said McCain and then-pastor Richard Jackson had a conversation about membership and baptism when Cindy McCain joined the church. Without revealing details, Yearly indicated that McCain decided to retain his Episcopal identification.

"You have to be baptized by immersion to be a member [of North Phoenix]," Yearly said. "John and I have dialogued about that." Yearly declined to give details but said conclusively, "John is an Episcopalian, and he and his family attend North Phoenix Baptist Church when he is in town."

The congregation was among the SBC's most prominent during the 1980s, and its pastor, Jackson—although a theological conservative—carried the banner unsuccessfully for the moderate opposition in the SBC presidential elections of 1987 and 1988.

Moderate Southern Baptists steadily lost the power to appoint trustees to seminary boards and mission agencies. Fundamentalist-oriented pastors have elected SBC presidents who since 1979 have appointed like-minded trustees to rid institutions of "liberal" professors and social-cultural moderates. Jackson narrowly lost the 1988 race to Jerry Vines by 692 delegate votes out of more than 32,200.

When Yearly was asked by the Century who were the most influential persons in his ministry, he named Carl Bates, a pastor who was SBC president from 1970 to 1972, and Ken Chafin, a noted professor of evangelism at two major Southern Baptist seminaries and a leading opponent of the conservative movement.

In a debate against conservative organizer Paige Patterson before a meeting of religion reporters in 1981, Chafin accused Patterson and his allies of "a ruthless reach for personal power." Later that decade, when conservatives had gained control, Chafin helped form the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a paradenominational body for moderates disaffected with the SBC.

While Yearly may admire some moderates in Southern Baptist culture, he carefully avoids hot-button religious issues. He said a recent Reuters article that explored McCain's faith had mischaracterized Yearly's position on homosexuality, making him sound like a "right-winger." "The reporter asked if I am accepting and affirming of homosexuality," Yearly said. "I am accepting because we accept everyone. We accept all sinners. You're a sinner, I'm a sinner. Are we accepting of their lifestyle? No, because it's a biblical issue."

The pastor is aware of a dozen or more gays who are members of North Phoenix Baptist. Yearly said he has told them that they are welcome, but that he can't "encourage their lifestyle."

If McCain is elected, Yearly could find himself serving as a spiritual adviser to the president, a role that has launched other clergy into national prominence. But the minister downplays that possibility. "I have had no conversation with him whatsoever about it," Yearly said, but added, "I would do anything he asked me to do." -Greg Warner (*Associated Baptist Press*) and other sources