

Will the Obama family pick a black church? Another choice to dissect: Another choice to dissect

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President-elect Barack Obama says that the historically black church moved him from a skeptic to a believer.

He has spoken appreciatively of its vibrant worship, written about how the black church experience has moved him to tears. And he has credited black congregations for their work in helping the powerless and in speaking truth to power.

But when he officially takes up residence in the White House, will the nation's first black president attend a black church? And, in a larger sense, does it matter if he does or doesn't?

Some observers think he may ultimately choose a black church, given his previous attraction to the predominantly black Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, his church home before the fiery sermons of the former senior pastor Jeremiah Wright became a drag on his campaign.

Noel Erskine, associate professor at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, suspects that the president-elect is considering another black congregation after his mainly positive experience at Trinity.

"I would be surprised if he wouldn't be looking for one in the Washington, D.C., area," said Erskine, whose school is part of Emory University.

Erskine expects black congregations to be part of the Obama family's search "as a continuation of the family's experience of church," including his wife's and his mother-in-law's roots in the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

"I feel that they will give as careful a search for church as they gave for the school of the girls," he said. "Perhaps the compromise will be that since they chose a white

school for the girls they will choose a black church, and Sunday school, for them.”

After the controversy surrounding Wright, however, University of Chicago Divinity School professor Dwight Hopkins thinks Obama might choose a black congregation that is in some respects milder than Trinity.

“There are various forms of preaching and, of course, African-American preaching has various styles,” said Hopkins, a theology professor who is a member of Trinity. “I could see him and the first family settling in a church in the D.C. area that would have the same liberal and progressive theological bent but the emotive and bodily expression of that element might be more toned down—mild in that sense.”

Washington has an array of predominantly black churches from which to choose, including Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church, Shiloh Baptist Church and Covenant Baptist Church.

But Hopkins said whatever church Obama picks is not likely to be conservative.

“I don’t think he’s going to give up the liberal and progressive theology,” he said. “That’s who he is—before he came to Trinity in Chicago, when he joined Trinity and after he left Trinity.”

Though Hopkins can imagine Obama attending a black church, he cautioned against making too much about Obama, or his feelings about race, solely on the basis of where he chooses to worship on Sunday mornings.

“It’s clear that he enjoys [the] black church, he enjoys black worship,” said the professor, who knows both Obama and his wife, Michelle, professionally. “It doesn’t say that he’s reneging or not reneging.”

Nick Shapiro, a spokesperson for Obama’s transition team, said, “What church President-elect Obama chooses is a private decision that he will make.”

In his autobiographical books, Obama captured the ethos of the African-American church and what he found attractive about it.

“Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation,” he wrote in *The Audacity of Hope*. “It had to serve as the center of the community’s political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and

clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities.”

Hearing Wright preach about “the audacity of hope” brought Obama to tears, he wrote in *Dreams from My Father*.

“Those stories—of survival, and freedom, and hope—became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears,” Obama wrote, “until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world.”

Whether Obama chooses a black church or not, his choice will be dissected, just as many of his other choices have been and will be, said Eddie S. Glaude Jr., professor of religion and African-American studies at Princeton University.

“No matter . . . where he chooses to attend, his choice is already over-determined by the legacy, the history of race and religion in the United States,” said Glaude. “It’s like everything with this presidency. It is freighted with symbolic and substantive significance. . . . It’s just uncharted territory.” —*Adelle M. Banks, Religion News Service*