

Clinton talks faith with National Baptists

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. (RNS)—Talking about one's faith doesn't come naturally to a "Midwestern Methodist," Hillary Clinton admitted. But she spent about a half-hour doing just that, addressing the National Baptist Convention, USA, one of the nation's oldest and largest African-American religious organizations.

The Democratic presidential nominee quoted Scripture and hymns as she described her "activist, social-justice faith—a roll-up-your-sleeves-and-get-your-hands-dirty faith."

"I am grateful for the gift of personal salvation and for the great obligation of the social gospel to use the gift of grace wisely, to reflect the love of God and to follow the example of Jesus Christ to the greater good of God's beloved community," she said. "That's what led me to devote my life in the ways I could to serving others."

Clinton's Sept. 8 remarks at the 136th annual session of the National Baptist Convention, USA, in Kansas City followed Donald Trump's address a few days earlier to the predominantly African-American Great Faith Ministries International Church in Detroit.

Early influences

In her speech, Clinton remembered her father kneeling beside his bed to pray and her mother teaching Sunday school. She remembered traveling from Chicago's suburbs into the city with her church youth minister to attend a black congregation for the first time and to hear a speech by Martin Luther King Jr. and shake his hand.

She recounted the “hard lesson” she has taught as the occasional Sunday school teacher: “We’re not asked to love each other, not urged or requested. We’re commanded to love. Indeed, Jesus made it his greatest commandment.”

Faith and works

She repeated the Methodist credo that has peppered her speeches throughout her campaign: “Do all the good you can for all the people you can in all the ways you can as long as ever you can.”

And she drew applause and shouts, citing a quote attributed to St. Francis, “Try to preach the gospel always, and, if necessary, use words,” and Bible verses: “Faith without works is dead” and “We cannot just be hearers of the word, we must be doers.”

“For me, it has always been about trying to live up to the responsibility described by the prophet Micah—that we do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with our God,” she said.

Impact of faith on public policy

Clinton also praised the gun buyback program at Tabernacle Community Baptist Church in Milwaukee while pledging to support “common-sense gun safety reforms.”

She remembered celebrating the 60th anniversary of Rosa Parks’ resistance to segregation at Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church in Montgomery, Ala., saying: “Rosa Parks may have opened up every seat on the bus. Now it’s our job to create good jobs so everyone can afford the fare.”

She pledged to reform the criminal justice system, address systemic racism, raise the national minimum wage, guarantee equal pay for women,

support small businesses and bring back high school vocational programs. She called threats to limit voting rights a “blast from the Jim Crow past.”

And she touted her experience as secretary of state, wrestling with the hard choices “that will drive you to your knees” with President Obama in the Situation Room.

“As president, I will be your partner in this work of translating love into action,” she said.

Throughout the night, Clinton took several jabs at her Republican opponent. Clinton leads Trump 91 percent to 1 percent with registered African-American voters nationwide, according to a NBC News/Wall Street Journal survey released last month.

Trump has “a long history of racial discrimination in his business,” Clinton asserted. And she responded to his recent appeal to black voters, in which he said: “You’re living in poverty; your schools are no good. You have no jobs; 58 percent of your youth is unemployed. What the hell do you have to lose?”

“People who look at the African-American community and see only poverty, crime and despair are missing so much,” she said.

Clinton also spoke about the humility she said is rarely mentioned in politics, but an important quality in a leader, admitting she’d made mistakes.

“It’s grace that lifts us up, grace that leads us home,” she said.