

# Diverse Christians rally for Kamala Harris

August 19, 2024

WASHINGTON (RNS)—A diverse group of Christians is throwing support behind Vice President Kamala Harris' White House bid, organizing fundraisers and Zoom calls.

They not only hope to help catapult the Democrat to victory in November, but also reclaim their faith from Republicans in the process.

Their efforts come on the heels of similar campaigns aimed at specific constituency groups, such as the recent "White Dudes for Harris" Zoom call that featured celebrities and grabbed headlines.

John Pavlovitz, a liberal-leaning Christian author and activist, was on that call when he hatched the idea for a Christian-centric version and texted his friend Malynda Hale, a singer, actress and fellow activist.

"We had a conversation about how, specifically on the Democratic side of the political spectrum, you don't hear a lot of people talking about their faith," Hale told Religion News Service. "We wanted people to know that there are progressive Christians, there are Christians on the Democratic, left-leaning side, so that they didn't feel alone."

The result was Christians for Kamala, a part-fundraiser, part-virtual roundtable livestreamed event on Aug. 12.

Featured speakers cited their faith as they praised liberal policies and personally endorsed Harris—who recently entered the presidential race after President Joe Biden bowed out—and her running mate, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz.

Over the course of the nearly three-hour event, the group raised more than \$150,000 for the Harris campaign, a number that has climbed to just shy of \$200,000 in the days since.

“It’s been really difficult to keep up with the flood of comments and connections that have been coming in,” said Pavlovitz, who said the only formal help he received from the Harris campaign was in setting up a donation system for fundraising.

## **Groups assemble prior to DNC in Chicago**

Several Christian groups—including evangelicals, a constituency key to former President Donald Trump’s base—have assembled similar calls in the lead up to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

Most have had little to no assistance from the official Harris-Walz campaign, which, barely a month old, has yet to announce a dedicated faith outreach director.

The emerging grassroots coalition vies not only to bolster Harris but also to push back on what organizers say is a false assumption that to be Christian is to be a Republican—or a supporter of former President Donald Trump.

Christianity has long been associated with the Republican Party, which is more than 80 percent Christian, according to a 2022 survey from the Public Religion Research Institute. It also has been associated with Trump, who has benefitted from the consistent support of white evangelical voters.

But while the same PRRI poll found that 31 percent of Democrats are religiously unaffiliated, the majority—around 60 percent—still ascribe to various forms of Christianity.

The difference lies in the types of Christians that make up each party's ranks. While 68 percent of the GOP are white Christians (with 30 percent of the party represented by white evangelical Protestants alone) only 24 percent of Democrats are the same.

They primarily are white Catholics (10 percent) and white mainline Protestants (9 percent), while white evangelicals only represent 4 percent.

Meanwhile, Black Protestants—a key part of the Democratic base—constitute 16 percent of the Democratic Party, with Hispanic Protestants representing 3 percent, Hispanic Catholics 12 percent and “other Christians” rounding out the group with an additional 6 percent.

## **Diversity on display**

That diversity was on display during the Christians for Kamala call, which included a mix of faith leaders such as Jacqui Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church in New York City and Lennox Yearwood Jr., head of the nonprofit Hip Hop Caucus; activists like environmentalist Bill McKibben and LGBTQ+ rights advocate Charlotte Clymer; and commentators such as CNN's Van Jones.

They also included politicians, such as New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker and Texas State Rep. James Talarico.



Rep. James Talarico speaks on the floor of the Texas House of Representatives on May 24, 2021, in Austin. (Courtesy photo via RNS)

The speakers linked their support for specific policies, such as working to blunt the impacts of climate change or passing immigration reform, to their faith and Christian Scripture. Some rebuked conservative Christianity's ties to the GOP, calling it a form of Christian nationalism.

"My faith in Jesus leads me to reject Christian nationalism and commit myself to the project of a multiracial, multicultural democracy where we can all freely love God and fully love our neighbors," said Talarico, a Presbyterian Church (USA) seminarian who has been vocal in his condemnation of Christian nationalism in Texas.

"That same faith leads me to support Vice President Harris to be the next president of the United States."

Although a member of a mainline denomination, Talarico also was a speaker on a separate Evangelicals for Harris Zoom call on Aug. 14. Organized by Faith Voters, a 501(c)4 organization, the effort was geared toward conservative Christians who disproportionately have sided with Trump.

The call struck a different tone than Christians for Kamala. Some speakers noted they never had endorsed a candidate before, and at least one pastor suggested he was risking friendships and relationships with his congregation by participating.

News of the event sparked blowback from conservatives, such as Sean Feucht, an evangelical worship leader and activist who once ran for Congress in California and has at least informally worked with prominent Republican strategists for his own initiatives.

Feucht, who has said he is in regular contact with Trump's campaign staff, accused evangelicals who participated in the call of apostasy and heresy, deriding them on social media as "Heretics for Harris."

In addition, Franklin Graham, son of famed evangelist Billy Graham, decried a new advertisement produced by Evangelicals for Harris targeting swing state voters, saying it was "trying to mislead people" by using images of his father.

But call participants like evangelical activist Shane Claiborne appeared unmoved by the criticism, as was Jerushah Duford, a counselor who is also Billy Graham's granddaughter and Franklin Graham's niece.

"Voting Kamala, for me, is so much greater than policies," Duford said. "It's a vote against another four years of faith leaders justifying the actions of a man who destroys the message Jesus came to spread, and that is why I get involved in politics."

**'People of conscience need to take a stand'**



Too often, any discussion of racial justice is discounted as “woke” or branded as “critical race theory,” author Jemar Tisby said. (Photo / Ken Camp)

Jemar Tisby, an author and historian who spoke during the call, told RNS that while he grew up in conservative Christian communities, he does not identify as evangelical himself, preferring the term “evangelical adjacent.”

Even so, he felt compelled to participate because, he said, “we have the choice before us between democracy and authoritarianism, and I feel like this is a historic moment when people of conscience need to take a stand.”

Tisby, author of the forthcoming book *The Spirit of Justice: True Stories of Faith, Race, and Resistance*, also praised the diversity represented on the call, some of which was conducted in Spanish. He said it represented a broader understanding of evangelicalism than is often represented in U.S. politics.

“Many people of color, many women, many people who traditionally have not been platformed or been passed the mic, are now able to have their voices heard. I think that’s very significant,” Tisby said.

The call closed with remarks from former Rep. Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, a Republican who drew backlash from fellow conservatives after he became

one of 10 Republicans to vote to impeach Trump for insurrection connected to the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Kinzinger argued the current Republican Party does not resemble “conservatism or, frankly, Christianity,” and lamented “pastors and faith leaders that have sold themselves down the river.” Some of today’s support for Trump, he said, amounted to a form of idol worship.

There are “certainly a few things that can make God a little jealous,” he said. “And one of those is worshipping something other than him. And that’s what you see in today’s GOP.”