

Former faith supporters tepid toward candidate Trump

November 17, 2022

WASHINGTON (RNS)—When Donald Trump launched his 2020 reelection bid in Orlando, Fla., three years ago, the event was riddled with faith-speak.

Both Trump and then-Vice President Mike Pence repeatedly referenced God, arguing the Almighty had blessed America.

Trump's closest evangelical adviser, Florida pastor Paula White-Cain, opened up the event with a passionate invocation in which she insisted the "hand of God" would work for Trump.

But when Trump announced yet another White House bid from his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida on Nov. 15, he did so with a speech devoid of overt religious references.

It was unclear if the event included an invocation, and while some of Trump's stalwart evangelical supporters were seen milling about the resort's carpeted floors—namely conservative commentator Eric Metaxas, pastor Mark Burns and MyPillow CEO Mike Lindell—many of the former president's longtime religious defenders were nowhere to be seen.

Sound of silence

Instead, most have remained silent about his new campaign, while others have hinted at allegiances to other potential 2024 presidential contenders such as Pence and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis.



President Donald Trump (left) is greeted by Pastor Robert Jeffress at the Celebrate Freedom Rally in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Yuri Gripas/REUTERS via RNS)

Pastor Robert Jeffress from First Baptist Church in Dallas, one of Trump's most stalwart religious supporters, who preached a sermon to Trump on his Inauguration Day titled "When God Chooses a Leader," signaled the former president may not be his candidate in the primary.

"Donald Trump was a great president, and if he becomes the GOP nominee in 2024 I will happily support him," Jeffress told Religion News Service in a statement.

But hours before Trump's speech on Tuesday, Jeffress encouraged his Twitter followers to buy Pence's new book, *So Help Me God*, and described the former vice president as "a great friend, a committed Christian, and a true American hero."

In his daily podcast "The Briefing," Al Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a Trump critic in 2016 turned Trump supporter in 2020, briefly mused on Trump's reelection bid. But Mohler said, with the late hour of the announcement, "it is sufficient to say he made the announcement in what was described as a rambling one-hour speech."

“By the way, the last candidate to have served as president, lost an election and come back to win another election was Grover Cleveland. Well over a century ago,” Mohler added.

Another of Trump’s former evangelical advisers, Tony Suarez, chief operating officer of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, encouraged fellow conservatives to rally around Trump but stopped short of declaring his ascendancy inevitable.

“Tonight’s announcement was the worst kept secret in recent memory. If recent history had taught us anything it’s that there’s no such thing as a ‘sure thing,’” Suarez, who recently praised DeSantis, said in a text message.

“That said, I expect President Trump to be our nominee. Now is not the time for conservatives to be divided. We need a unified front to take back the White House and Senate.”

Burns, a South Carolina pastor and an early devotee of Trump, posted a video of himself in the Mar-a-Lago crowd.

“I believe that we will bring God back to the center of American politics and American culture,” he said. “We’re about to continue to Make America Great Again. ... All of America who loves freedom, who loves smaller government, who loves God, who wants to make sure faith is at the center of our nation, they are here tonight in Mar-a-Lago.”

It was unclear whether White-Cain attended Trump’s announcement. She was silent about his announcement on Twitter, despite running a national faith advisory board seen as an effort to reinvigorate Trump’s conservative Christian base.

Meanwhile, influential conservative voices such as Princeton University professor and legal scholar Robert George have declared their support for

DeSantis.

“This seems like just the right moment to announce my endorsement of Ron DeSantis of Florida for President,” George tweeted on Tuesday evening.