

Inaugural events bracketed by prayers, controversy and ecumenism

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—The official events connected to the inauguration of Barack Obama as the 44th president of the United States started Jan. 18 with an invocation and ended Jan. 21 with a benediction.

The religious content of—and controversy over—the events between those two bookends encapsulate America’s ongoing give-and-take over the role of religion in the nation’s political life.

Early in his inaugural address, Obama alluded to the Bible—the Apostle Paul’s words to the church at Corinth—in a call to more civil discourse and more prudent decision-making.

“On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises—the recriminations and worn-out dogmas—that for far too long have strangled our politics,” he said. “We remain a young nation, but, in the words of Scripture, the time has come to ‘set aside childish things.’”

President Barack Obama takes the oath of office to become the 44th president of the United States. (PHOTO/RNS/ Noah K. Murray/The Star-Ledger)

Obama, who is a Christian, also invoked “God’s grace” at the end of his speech. But, in praising American diversity, he acknowledged those of minority faiths, as well as secular Americans.

“We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We

are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and nonbelievers,” he said.

The reference reflected the ecumenical tone of the ceremony and the week’s other religious events related to the inauguration.

He began the day—as all presidents have since 1933—with a private prayer service at St. John’s Episcopal Church, located on Lafayette Square just across from the White House. Speakers included the church’s rector, Luis Leon, as well as prominent evangelical pastors T.D. Jakes and Joel Hunter.

Rick Warren

Evangelical pastor Rick Warren began the swearing-in ceremony itself with an invocation.

Warren offered a prayer that began on an inclusive note. He quoted the Shema, the most common prayer in Judaism, and also alluded to the Islamic formulation of referring to God, or Allah, as “the compassionate and merciful.”

“Almighty God—our Father. Everything we see, and everything we can’t see, exists because of you alone. It all comes from you. It all belongs to you. It all exists for your glory. History is your story,” Warren prayed. “The Scripture tells us, ‘Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.’ And you are the compassionate and merciful one. And you are loving to everyone you have made.”

He ended on a more explicitly Christian note, closing his prayer “in the name of the one who changed my life” and referring the Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish and English names for Jesus. He then led the 2 million-plus observers in the Lord’s Prayer.

Gene Robinson

One other prayer delivered at an inaugural event garnered almost as much attention as Warren's. The committee in charge of official inaugural activities picked Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire, to deliver the invocation at the Jan. 18 inaugural kick-off concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. His intentionally nonsectarian beginning was itself an exercise in trying to strike a balance between civil religion and inclusiveness.

"O God of our many understandings, we pray that you will bless us with tears—tears for a world in which over a billion people exist on less than a dollar a day, where young women in many lands are beaten and raped for wanting an education and thousands die daily from malnutrition, malaria, and AIDS," Robinson prayed.

Robinson's selection was praised by gay-rights groups who had been angered by the Warren pick but panned by those who oppose the Episcopal Church's decision to consecrate him as a bishop despite his sexuality.

Things were less controversial at the Jan. 21 Washington National Cathedral prayer service that officially ended the inaugural ceremonies. Obama, his wife, Michelle, Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, Jill, members of Congress and other dignitaries packed the cathedral to lift up the new administration in prayer.

Obama put his stamp on the traditional service, asking a larger and more ecumenical group of religious leaders than in the past to speak.

Although the order of worship—with hymns such as "Holy, Holy, Holy" and "Great is Thy Faithfulness," choral presentations and a homily—followed a traditional Episcopal liturgy, it also featured prayers and responsive readings by a broad array of Jewish, Christian, Muslim and Hindu leaders.

Among the Christians participating were Otis Moss Jr., who recently retired as pastor of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, and Andy

Stanley, pastor of North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Ga.

Moss' son, Otis Moss III is the pastor of Obama's former congregation, Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Stanley is the son of Charles Stanley, the former Southern Baptist Convention president and longtime pastor of First Baptist Church of Atlanta.

The service also featured women prominently, including a woman delivering the sermon.

Sharon Watkins

Sharon Watkins, president and general minister of the Disciples of Christ, drew on Isaiah 58. In it, the prophet upbraids the ancient Israelites for keeping holy fasts but denying justice to the poor even as they have just returned from a long period of exile.

“Is not this the fast that I choose, to loose the bonds of injustice; to share your bread with the hungry and to bring the homeless poor into a house?” the prophet asked.

She asked Obama to lead Americans to choose the proper fast.

“In hard financial times, which fast do we choose? The fast that placates our hunkered-down soul, or the fast that reaches out to our brother and sister?” she said.

“In times such as these, we need you, the leaders of this nation—all of you. We need you to be guided by the counsel that Isaiah gave so long ago to work for the common good, to work for the public happiness, to work for the well-being of the nation and the world.

“This is the biblical way; it is also the American way—to look beyond ourselves, to reach out to neighbor, to build communities of common hope, of liberty and justice for all.”

