

Trump’s alleged remark discomfits some—not all—of his evangelical advisers

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—At least three members of the White House’s informal board of evangelical advisers distanced themselves from President Trump’s alleged vulgar reference to certain poor non-white countries during talks about immigration reform.

In the past, when Trump’s critics have pressed board members to repudiate language of the president that was widely deemed offensive, the advisers have demurred, arguing that it’s not their role to publicly chastise the president.

But this particular crude comment, allegedly made Jan. 11 in response to lawmakers who asked about protections for immigrants from Haiti, El Salvador and Africa, seemingly left at least some of these advisers uncomfortable enough to counter with their own words on the topic.

Other board members, usually quick to jump to the president’s defense, declined to answer questions about the remark, which caused an immediate firestorm, with many commentators describing it as racist.

‘Created in the image of God’

That was not the take of Samuel Rodriguez, a member of the unofficial evangelical advisory board and the president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference. However, he noted “every single person is created in the image of God” and spoke of welcoming people equally

from Nigeria and Norway, albeit after “a rigorous vetting process.”

Later, he said more: “In addition, and with great due deference, I believe that the comments attributed to our president can best be described as wrong, inappropriate and hurtful. Why? Because when God looks at these nations, he sees his children.”

Ronnie Floyd, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and another adviser, was also critical of the president’s remarks. He told the *Washington Post*: “I would not agree with those comments at all. We need to see that every person is made in the image of God.”

Johnnie Moore, a former vice president of Liberty University and the *de facto* spokesman for the unofficial advisory board, responded in an email about Trump’s alleged remark: “Obviously, those words aren’t words we would use, and everyone who knows us knows this.”

Disputed derogatory term

Trump published a series of tweets denying that he used the crude term after the *Washington Post* reported on the meeting. He also said that he “never said anything derogatory about Haitians.”

“The language used by me at the DACA meeting was tough, but this was not the language used. What was really tough was the outlandish proposal made—a big setback for DACA!” one of his tweets stated.

But Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., who was at the meeting, corroborated the *Washington Post* report to Associated Press Jan. 12. “He said these hate-filled things, and he said them repeatedly.”

More than 80 percent of white evangelicals cast their ballots for Trump in the 2016 election, making them his most loyal group of religious voters.

Need for bipartisan cooperation

In the midst of the uproar over the president's alleged derogatory language, Moore and others on Trump's unofficial evangelical advisory board focused on efforts to reach a bipartisan deal on immigration.

That was the issue on the table when Trump, whose language in reference to immigrants often has been harsh—and in the opinion of many of his critics, discriminatory and racist—made his comments on people from El Salvador, Haiti and Africa.

Moore said Democrats need to compromise with Trump, who wants to build a wall to keep people from illegally crossing from Mexico into the United States.

“If the Democrats support an inanimate object (the wall)—a policy supported by most Democrat leaders also for many, many years for the same security reasons for which Republicans support it today—then the Republicans will easily line up in mass to get Dreamers permanently cared for,” Moore said, referring to recipients of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program.

Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced in September the administration's intention to end DACA, created through executive order under President Obama to offer work permits to undocumented immigrants brought to the country as children. But Trump offered a six-month window for Congress to pass legislation before the program expires, a move his evangelical advisers claimed was partly the result of their lobbying efforts.

Deja vu all over again

Tony Suarez, a vice president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference and a member of the unofficial board, declined to

offer a direct response to Trump's inflammatory remarks. He, too, focused on the issue of immigration.

"We are experiencing *deja vu*," he said. "Every time we get close to reaching a deal on immigration we get derailed right before the finish line."

The blowback over the president's allegedly insulting language echoes the response when Trump said "both sides" were responsible for the tragic violence in Charlottesville, Va., last summer, when he seemed to equate white supremacists with counterprotesters.

One evangelical board member subsequently left the group in protest, but Liberty University President Jerry Falwell Jr. told Fox News at the time that Trump "doesn't have a racist bone in his body."

When asked for a response Jan. 12 to Trump's alleged remarks in the recent Oval Office meeting, Falwell said through a Liberty official that he had "no comment on this issue."

'Right on target'

At least one member of Trump's unofficial evangelical advisory board, which includes more than 20 clergy and prominent lay people from several denominations, publicly backed Trump.

According to David Brody of the Christian Broadcasting Network, Dallas pastor Robert Jeffress—whose book the president promoted on Twitter in October—issued a defense of Trump Jan. 12.

"Apart from the vocabulary attributed to him, President Trump is right on target in his sentiment," said Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas. "As individual Christians, we have a biblical responsibility to place the needs of others above our own, but as commander-in-chief, President Trump has the constitutional responsibility to place the interests of our

nation above the needs of other countries.

“I’m grateful to have a president like Donald Trump who clearly understands the distinction and has the courage to protect the well-being of our nation.”

Pastor Mark Burns, another adviser, also aligned himself with the president in a tweet, saying his remarks were about “lazy governments” and not racism.

‘They are us’

Meanwhile, other faith leaders condemned the alleged remarks.

The National Council of Churches issued a statement in which it “unequivocally” condemned the remarks, describing them as “deeply disturbing.” It also decried another alleged statement by the president suggesting the United States bring in more people from countries such as Norway, saying such rhetoric “reveals a deep-seated racism that is unacceptable.”

The Progressive National Baptist Convention also issued a statement: “It is not enough that Trump says these hurtful words and suffers no consequences. It is that he is developing policies on the basis of race that will hurt people of color for years to come.”

Russell Moore, head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s public policy arm and longtime critic of Trump, tweeted out a message of solidarity with nations in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean: “The church of Jesus Christ is led by, among others, our brothers and sisters from Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. They are us.”

Ed Stetzer, a professor at Wheaton College and another evangelical critic of Trump, also encouraged his fellow faithful to condemn the remarks

Friday in an op-ed for the *Washington Post*.

“So, the commander in chief used a filthy or ‘tough’ word to the point that it stunned those who heard it,” he wrote. “But beyond the profanity, the most startling part of his remark is his suggestion that certain people’s living conditions should disqualify them from immigrating to the United States.”

This article was edited to remove the offensive term allegedly used in the White House meeting.