

# **A healing president and devoted Episcopalian: Ford's "care-filled ministry" gratefully recognized**

by [John Dart](#) in the [January 23, 2007](#) issue

Former President Gerald R. Ford, praised in death as a low-key healer for the nation in the troubled aftermath of the White House Watergate scandals and the Vietnam War, was eulogized in a succession of Episcopal services at the turn of the new year.

The Episcopal connection was not perfunctory. Ford's "care-filled ministry over many decades" as a layperson drew a strong expression of gratitude in a statement by the Episcopal Church's presiding bishop, Katharine Jefferts Schori.

The pastor at the Episcopal church where the Fords have worshiped for three decades in California said that the ex-president asked him before last summer's Episcopal convention to work for reconciliation in the strife over gay ordination and women bishops. "He said he did not think they should be divisive for anyone who lived by the Great Commandments and the Great Commission to love God and neighbor," said the rector, Robert G. Certain, in his homily at the January 2 service in Washington National Cathedral.

The longtime Republican member of Congress from Michigan had been thrust into higher office in the 1970s—first as vice president to replace Spiro Agnew, following Agnew's involvement in a tax evasion controversy, then as president to succeed Richard Nixon, who was faced with evidence of involvement in cover-ups after the Watergate burglary at Democratic Party offices.

In his national address in August 1974 following Nixon's resignation, Ford said in a memorable line, "Our long national nightmare is over." He added: "You have not elected me as your president by your ballot, and so I ask you to confirm me as your president with your prayers."

When he issued a full pardon of Nixon a few weeks later, Ford angered many at the time—a decision often said to have led to his defeat by Democrat Jimmy Carter in the 1976 presidential election. But Ford's act was seen in a positive light in later years.

Ford's death at 93 on December 26 at his home in Rancho Mirage, California, briefly fostered bipartisan cooperation in Washington as politicians geared up for this month's transition with Democrats taking control of both houses of Congress.

Yet his previously unstated reservations about the war in Iraq—made to journalist Bob Woodward in a July 2004 interview, to be disclosed and published only after Ford's death—irked some Republicans. Disagreeing "very strongly" with Bush's justifications for invading Iraq, Ford said he would have pushed more vigorously for alternatives such as sanctions, according to Woodward's story in the *Washington Post*.

On January 2, declared a national day of mourning, President Bush and other dignitaries eulogized Ford at the Episcopal-run National Cathedral service. His body was then flown to Grand Rapids, Michigan, for a funeral service at Grace Episcopal Church, where Carter, an active Baptist, said in his eulogy that he believed with Ford that Christians should strive for harmony and reconciliation. "We took to heart the admonition of the apostle Paul that Christians should not be divided over seemingly important but tangential issues, including sexual preferences and the role of women in the church," Carter said.

The series of services for Ford and his family began December 29 with private rites at St. Margaret's Episcopal Church in Palm Desert. He and wife Betty, 88, while less active on the national stage than other former White House residents, were involved in local philanthropies in the desert resort area. The couple supported a local Desert AIDS project, including walking in the first Desert AIDS Walk in 1987.

The continuing denominational storm over gay issues concerned the former president, according to Certain, their parish rector and a delegate to the 2006 Episcopal General Convention in Columbus, Ohio.

In his National Cathedral homily, Certain said Ford asked him before last summer's convention if schism was likely over issues of "human sexuality and the leadership of women." (The first-ever election last year of a woman presiding bishop for the Episcopal Church had engendered protests by dissident dioceses and parishes

already upset by the convention's ratification in 2003 of an openly gay bishop, V. Gene Robinson of New Hampshire.)

"He then asked me to work for reconciliation in the church," Certain said. "I assured him I would, just as he had worked for reconciliation within this nation 30 years ago."

The priest will begin a new form of reconciling ministry this year. Certain—a former U.S. Air Force pilot, prisoner of war in North Vietnam and military chaplain—retired from St. Margaret's parish on January 7 and will start a new ministry with soldiers returning from Afghanistan and Iraq, reported Episcopal News Service.

During their White House tenure from 1974 to 1977, the Fords often attended St. John's Episcopal Church in Lafayette Square, known as the "church of the presidents."

Church leaders praised the Fords for supporting fund-raising initiatives by Episcopal Relief and Development, formerly the Presiding Bishops Fund for World Relief. Gerald Ford was also remembered for his volunteer assistance in the 1990 completion of work on the National Cathedral.

Certain said in a newspaper interview that the couple's favorite Bible passage was Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your path."

The priest told the *Los Angeles Times* that the Fords turned to those verses in trying times. Certain said that when Nixon was deciding whether Ford should be his vice president, the Fords would repeat the verses before going to bed. Ford placed his hand on that page in Proverbs during his inauguration as president.