

The politician's pastor: Vetting the minister

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It's been an odd season for pastors and would-be presidents. The latter have been renouncing the former faster than you can say "damage control." Barack Obama quit his membership at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago after Catholic priest Michael Pfleger delivered a sermon there in which he mocked Hillary Clinton for her alleged racism. Having already endured several rounds of controversy over Trinity's retired pastor, Jeremiah Wright, Obama decided he was not interested in defending his congregation from any more complaints about extremist statements. John McCain's renunciation of pastors John Hagee and Rod Parsley, who had both endorsed him for president, received less hyperventilating media coverage, though Hagee's contention that God used the Holocaust to gather the Jews to Israel and hasten the end times and Parsley's comment that Islam's Muhammad is "the mouthpiece of a conspiracy of spiritual evil" are wackier than anything Wright said.

There is an image, perhaps left over from Billy Graham's relationship with a long series of presidents, of the pastoral adviser as someone who shows up with a politician for prayer, moral support, perhaps a round of golf and a photo op, and leaves everyone feeling better. Wright, Pfleger, Hagee and Parsley are not Billy Graham. They hold theological positions outside the mainstream of American piety.

Of course, being outside the mainstream is not always a bad thing for pastors—it depends on what the issue is. We can be sure that after this election season, political handlers will be vetting former pastors and theological endorsers far more extensively. The new political rule will be: "No more pastor disasters." Which likely means no more pastors in the spotlight.

This development will be no great loss for pastors. Posing with a president is a heady experience for pastors, but proximity to political power does not always enhance their spiritual stature (Billy Graham himself might admit as much).

But it could be a loss for political candidates, who especially in the midst of the stresses and temptations of a campaign need a spiritual home and a pastoral friend. As Obama and McCain consider possible running mates, you can bet staffers are rifling through files (or Internet pages) to learn about politicians' religious backgrounds and, if they go to church, what their pastors have been saying. They'll be hoping to find only the most milquetoast of pastors—and ones who have never been critical of America.