

Historic inaugural events feature religious mixture: An ecumenical tone

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The inauguration of Barack Obama as president of the United States was solemnized over four days in January in Washington with prayers by a diverse group of clergy and admonitions from the new White House resident. The mixture of clergy reflected Obama's intention to cross religious lines.

Early in his January 20 inaugural address, Obama alluded to 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,'" Obama said, quoting 1 Corinthians 13:11.

Obama invoked "God's grace" at the end of his speech, but he also acknowledged those of minority faiths as well as secular Americans. "We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness," he said. "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and nonbelievers."

Atheist and secularist groups praised Obama's mention of the nonreligious, and it reflected the ecumenical tone of the ceremony and the week's other religious events related to the inauguration.

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

The swearing-in ceremony itself began with an invocation by evangelical megacelebrity Rick Warren, whose selection weeks earlier drew objections from gay activists because of the California pastor's opposition to same-sex marriage.

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

Warren ended on a more controversial note. He closed his prayer "in the name of the One who changed my life" and referred to the Hebrew, Arabic, Spanish and English names for Jesus. He then led the 2 million-plus observers in the Lord's Prayer.

A nonsectarian prayer without Christian-specific elements was delivered at a preinaugural event January 18 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial by V. Gene Robinson, the openly gay Episcopal bishop of New Hampshire. He prayed:

"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 went on to ask God for anger at discrimination, discomfort with simplistic political answers, and humility, patience and compassion to fight the battles ahead. His inclusion in the ceremonies pleased gay activists but was disparaged by many conservative evangelicals.

The United Methodist minister chosen to give the benediction for the inaugural event before the throng of spectators on or near the National Mall was Joseph Lowery, 87, who worked with Martin Luther King Jr. in the historic civil rights movement.

His prayer ended on lighthearted notes laced with humor "in the joy of a new beginning," as he put it.

"We ask you to help us work for that day when black will not be asked to get back . . . when brown can stick around . . . when yellow will be mellow . . . when the red man can get ahead, man . . . and when white will embrace what is right."

Lowery's ending, "Let all those who do justice and love mercy say, Amen," elicited two exuberant amens from the mass of people standing in the bitter cold.

A morning interfaith prayer service January 21 at Washington National Cathedral officially ended the inaugural ceremonies.

Obama and his wife, Michelle; Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, Jill; members of Congress and other dignitaries packed the cavernous Gothic cathedral to lift up the new administration in prayer—a tradition that dates back to George Washington. But the new president's stamp on the service meant that a larger and broader group of religious leaders would be on hand than those invited in the past. The order of worship followed a traditional Episcopal liturgy, but it also featured prayers and responsive readings by an array of Jews, Christians, Muslims and Hindus.

Christian leaders participating included Otis Moss Jr., recently retired pastor of Olivet Institutional Baptist Church in Cleveland, and Andy Stanley, pastor of North Point Community Church in Alpharetta, Georgia.

Women were featured prominently in the service. Participating besides Katharine Jefferts Schori, presiding bishop of the Episcopal Church, was Ingrid Mattson, secretary general of the Islamic Society of North America and professor of Islamic studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Mattson observed that this kind of official service very often calls on the traditional leadership of an older generation. "I think what happened today was a reflection of the reality of religious leadership in our time, which is that it is diverse. . . . Women are involved in great numbers in all the traditions."

Indeed, for the first time a woman delivered the sermon at the postinaugural service: Sharon Watkins, president and general minister of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Watkins urged the president and other leaders to continue to seek justice and the common good: "This is the biblical way. It is also the American way—to believe in something bigger than ourselves, to reach out to neighbor to build communities of possibility, of liberty and justice for all." -*Associated Baptist Press, Religion News Service*